

How political journalists respond to spin doctoring:  
Professional and cultural differences in election coverage of  
American, British and German newspaper journalists

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Paper to be presented at the Workshop „Political Journalism: New challenges, new practices“ at the Joint Session of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR),  
14 - 19 April 2000 in Copenhagen.

RE: Political Journalism: New challenges, new practices  
14 - 19 April 2000 in Copenhagen

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## **Spin Doctoring in the American, British and German Press: Meta Communication about Media Manipulation**

### **1. A New Stage of Political Journalism: Meta Coverage**

Political journalism is not static but is in a permanent state of development. Patterson (1994: Ch. 2) analyzed the political coverage of US election campaigns and distinguished three phases of political journalism: issue, strategy and meta coverage. In the 1960s "issue coverage" predominated which is characterized by a descriptive style of reporting. Candidates' policy statements were of inherent news value, candidates were the main agenda setters, their words carried the story.

Then a "quiet revolution" (Patterson 1994: 68) took place in contemporary journalism. In the 1970s the distribution of media coverage changed fundamentally from issue-based stories to such stories that emphasize who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or to stay ahead. This second stage which Patterson (1994: 159-81) and Jamieson (1992: 165-9) call "strategy coverage" is marked by several features: (1) winning and losing as the central concern, (2) the language of wars, games and competition, (3) a story with plots, performers, critics, and audience (voters), (4) centrality of performance, style, maneuvers, and manipulated appearances of the candidate, (5) journalists' interpretation and their questioning of candidates' motives, (6) strong emphasis of opinion polls and the candidates' standing in them. Empirical evidence suggests that the strategy frame is now being generalized by journalists from campaigns to governance and discussions of public policy issues (Cappella & Jamieson 1997).

Table 1: Developmental stages of political journalism

<b>Issue coverage: since 1900</b>	<b>Strategic coverage: since 1972</b>	<b>Meta coverage: since 1988</b>
Policy schema	Game schema	Behind the scenes schema
Descriptive framework	Interpretive framework	Self-analytical framework
Neutral reporting	Assertive reporting	Reflexive reporting
Politicians as main sources	Journalists as main sources	Spin doctors as new source
Focus on policy issues	Focus on campaign controversies	Focus on media manipulation

(based on Patterson 1994 and D'Angelo 1999)

The 1988 US presidential election can be seen as the watershed for a third stage of political journalism: media self-coverage or "meta coverage" (see Table 1). Here the press self-referentially and self-consciously diverges from its customary role as a conduit of information to one of reporting on how it is an actor on the campaign stage (D'Angelo 1999). Campaign journalists have become aware that getting covered is an inextricable part of candidates tactical plans and their stories have begun highlighting the manipulative nature of their own coverage. Entman (1989: 133) notes that "a striking example of this new self-consciousness appeared on the networks immediately after the 1988 presidential debates". There campaign journalists in post-debate mode openly discussed "spin", the backstage manoeuvres of campaign operatives to manipulate journalists' perceptions of their candidates points and performances. Similarly, Sumpter & Tankard (1994: 19) showed a marked increase of the term spin doctor in mainstream political news in 1988 so that it appeared one year later in a list of overused words and phrases. Strategic horse race coverage was now joined by stories about campaign handlers, what they were up to, and how the reporters felt about being handled. Some are critical of this new trend. In Gitlins (1991: 121) view it is "a defense manoeuvre, and a self-flattering one: the media could in this way show that they were immune to the ministrations of campaign professionals". By others meta coverage is considered both a logical product of the new emphasis on the political process and the growing sense of the media's central place within it (Stebenne 1993: 88).

There is still uncertainty among media scholars about how to conceptualize this new trend in political journalism. For Altheide & Snow (1991) meta communication is a clear indication of the "postjournalism era" which marks the latest phase in history of media effects research (see Table 2). Here the key concept is "reflexivity" or how social institutions and actors adopt the logic of the media and are thereby transformed into "second order media institutions" (Altheide & Snow 1991: x). In this "fundamentally different age" the minimal requirement of journalism is no longer fulfilled, namely that the thing to be represented exists independently of the journalist, that it had a status independently of the journalist's craft and perspective. Since news sources adopt the media logic, journalism is effectively reporting on itself. "In short, the communicative foundations of the events and activities are now increasingly reflections of the process and procedures for 'doing journalism' – this is mechanics and packaging" (Altheide & Snow 1991: 51). As journalists realize that the prevailing media logic has effectively terminated journalism as an effective representation of independent events and things, they seek a new analytical perspective – which

could be called meta communication. It fits in with the postmodern rationale of blurring distinctions between reality and appearance. „The appropriate attitude, according to some writers, is that of skepticism, if not cynicism. If we can have no, or much less confidence in anything, then everything is on an equal footing.“ (Altheide & Snow 1991: 11)

Table 2: Developmental stages of media effects research

Phase 1: 1900-30s	Phase 2: 1930s-60s	Phase 3: 1960s- 80s	Phase 4: 1990s-
Emphasis on nature and impact of mass media to shape public opinion	Shift from powerful effects assumptions to limited effects assumptions	Shift towards long-term social change, beliefs, ideologies, cultural patterns	– shift away from the content of communication to the forms, formats, logic of media – “postjournalism era” in which all social actors package their messages according to news formats and adopt their behavior to the media logic

(based on Altheide & Snow 1991)

From a different point of view, meta coverage is not seen as a postmodern move of skeptical, cynical journalists but as a conclusive response to fundamental changes in the political publicity process. These fundamental changes constitute the “Third Age of Political Communication” according to Blumler & Kavanagh (1999). Starting point of this new age is the realization that prevailing assumptions of a relatively stable dynamic between “the media” and “political actors and institutions” - i.e. the environment that shapes political communication - do no longer apply. Both sides of the traditional equation are becoming problematic, fragmented into multiple and contending alternative forms and rapidly spawning innovations of structure and function (Swanson 1999: 205). In this emerging “Third Age”, the dependence of politicians on professional consultants is likely to increase. These new political publicity professionals have skills specific to the media and persuasive communication, and they often rank high in the – restructured – hierarchies and have ready access to the leader a voice in political and policy decisions. “In many ways they are the new elites of Anglo-American politics, the products of a media-saturated style of politics. They represent the politicians’ professional approach to managing the media and resisting pressure from them.” (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999: 213)

The intensified professionalization of political publicity may however lead to an increasingly adversarial spirit among journalists. Hard nosed measures of news management are regarded by many journalists as an attempt on their professional autonomy and independence. This can result in “stories about the machinery and specific instances of news management, and stories that

cast doubt on politicians' statements and motives or unmask their appearances" (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999: 216). In other words, it can result in meta coverage.

Table 3: Developmental stages of political communication

Age 1: 1945-65	Age 2: 1965-1990	Age 3: 1990-
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Intensified professionalization of political advocacy, political consultancy and political publicity</li><li>- Increased competitive pressures: Political journalism comes under pressure from a stronger market and infotainment orientation</li><li>- Anti-elitist popularization and Populism: High brow media outlets come under pressure from audience preferences</li><li>- Centrifugal diversification: New media grow from the fringe to the center</li><li>- Audience reception of politics: "Pick and choose" culture emerges</li></ul>

(based on Blumler & Kavanagh 1999)

## 2. Modernization in comparative perspective

What is striking about these trends in political PR and political journalism is the at least superficial similarity of developments that have been observed in so many countries. The underlying explanation has been described as a subtly differentiated „modernization process“ (Mancini & Swanson 1996). It holds that similar processes of social change have been under way in many countries, leading to similar outcomes. But in each country, innovations are constructed – or adapted from experiences elsewhere – in response to local developments and needs. Hence, the modernization concept claims, similar forces have led political communication (i.e. election campaigning, political PR, reporting styles) to become more professionalized everywhere but the precise forms and influences of professionalization are distinctive in each country (Mancini & Swanson 1996; Swanson 1999).

It is no secret that the United States are seen as the birthplace of most innovations in this context. In the last British national election, the Labour Party copied many campaign techniques devised by the Clinton team in 1992. Labour had sent over a delegation which produced an internal party document entitled „The American Presidential Election of 1992 – What Can Labour Learn“. It became the blueprint for the 1997 Labour campaign in Britain (Michie 1998: 282-302). The authors of the paper were particularly impressed with the need for a coherent political message as well as with the need to stay „on message“ and to use regular opinion polling and telephone canvassing to monitor campaign progress. They borrowed many of the Clinton messages as

well as the idea of a war room, the setting-up of a rebuttal unit, a key seat task force, a 24 hour media monitoring unit, and an opposition research unit (Blumler & Kavangh 1997: 56-8; Kavanagh 1997: 29-30).

Next in line were the German Social Democrats (SPD). For them, the successful Blair campaign served as role model. Thanks to the lessons learned from Britain – and from the U.S. – the SPD managed to shape a slick, modern campaign.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in history of all German parties, the SPD opened a state-of-the-art campaign headquarters with the various units mentioned. Gerhard Schroeder's SPD election camp copied many elements of the Blair-campaign and held regular meetings with Blair's people before, during and after the election campaign (Esser et al. 2000: 210-11). Of particular interest were the exchanges between Schroeder's campaign guru Bodo Hombach with Blair's special adviser Peter Mandelson. Both were labelled the 'No. 1 spin doctor' of their respective candidates. Both published programmatic books on their party's new 'Third Way' policies – developing further the 'Triangulation' strategy of the successful 1996 Clinton strategy (Esser et al. 2000; Bergmann & Wickert 1999).

The institutional context of political consultancy and marketing practice in Britain and Germany differs in many ways from the situation in the United States though (Plasser et al. 1999: 90-1): Campaigns in the United States are candidate-centered, money and media driven, professionalized and highly individualized. In the two European countries, campaigns are still party-centered, receive free but very limited television time, are therefore less cost-intensive and managed mainly by party staff. The relevance of the candidate-centered, cost-intensive versus party-centered, labor-intensive distinction for campaign consultants is that "in the former case there is much more scope for individual candidates to employ their own specialists to fight election campaigns; by contrast in a party-centred system, such as most of Western Europe, it is more likely that the political parties will have their own campaign professionals as full-time employees" (Farrell 1998: 174).

Britain and Germany with their strong party and parliamentary systems, tightly regulated state-owned broadcasting networks and severe restrictions on paid TV political advertising could actually be considered resistant to American-style campaigning. But although the contextual factors relevant for political marketing processes and strategies of news management differ consi-

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<sup>1</sup> The SPD had also held meetings with American political consultants such as Hank Sheinkopf and Doug Shoen (Rosa 1998).

derably, the last British and German elections have given clear evidence that the degree of convergence is increasing (Scammell 1999; Plasser et al. 1999). The reason is simple: The majority of European political consultants said in a recent survey that they regard political marketing practice in the United States as a role model. They stated that "if there is a European style of political marketing, than its core is a modification of the American model" (Plasser et al. 1999: 96). Of particular interest are their comments about news management and the prime goal of influencing mass media reporting: A large proportion of European political consultants – among them many Germans and Britons – indicated that "professional spin control, issue building, and issue framing also are highly relevant factors in European campaign" (Plasser et al. 1999: 98).

### **3. Characterizing Meta Coverage**

For the news media, reporting on these media management activities is what we call meta communication. Meta coverage is „a new form of political communication“ (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles 1999: 28) in which news media are „turning spotlight inward“ (Johnson, Bourdieu & Glowacki 1996: 657) in their election coverage. It is important to distinguish it from strategy coverage. Three points are essential:

1. The strategy frame presents the campaign as a warfare between two camps, both armed with war books, war rooms, battle buses, rebuttal units, propaganda ammunition for use in attack ads or rapid rebuttals to opponents's attacks, opposition research units working on vulnerability studies and so on. With meta coverage, a subtle but important shift in the military perspective takes place: Reporters are substituted for political opponents as the perceived enemy of the campaign. „In the minds of correspondents (and often in the minds of campaign operatives), the struggle mutates to a peculiar us-against-them contest in which candidates are not to be trusted and reporters perceive themselves to be on the defensive against wily sneak attacks by guerilla insurgents armed with irresistible words and footage“ (Kerbel 1995: 75).
2. The strategy frame highlights persons instead of parties, pictures instead of words, and journalists' interpretation instead of candidates' statements. The meta communication frame highlights the campaign journalists' awareness that getting covered is an inextricable part of candidates' tactical plans. D'Angelo (1999: 6) argues „that when journalists re-focus journalistic objectivity 'inward' via self-coverage, they meta-communicate the awareness that they are being manipulated and attempt to publicly deconstruct its purpose“. By doing that, journalists

no longer stay on the balconies watching and reporting the campaign but rather assume an active role on the political stage – „reporters now write themselves into the election story“ (Kerbel (199: 88). The actor role gives them license to go backstage. „Like a gestalt shift, the images that once formed the background to political events – the setting and the stagecraft – now occupy the foreground“ (Adatto 1990: 5).

3. An increase in behind-the-scenes reporting by no means indicates rise in investigative or enterprise journalism. It is often the image makers and campaign strategists themselves who come out in the open offering insider assessments "on the record", appearing in television shows, inviting camera teams into their campaign headquarters. The Little Rock campaign headquarters of the 1992 Clinton campaign – the "War Room" – received what may be the ultimate media honor: It became the subject of a movie in which James Carville and George Stephanopoulos put on public display and in the foreground the art and practice of political image construction (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles 1999). They no longer hid the ghost-writing nature of the campaign but advertised and celebrated it - which gave it a dizzy blend of Hollywood. The documentary style film portrayed the two campaign handlers as glamorous war heroes: "Through publicity, the media made the press manipulation of the war room legitimate. Being a hired gun became cool" (Kerbel 1995: 83). The other extreme could be observed in Great Britain. *Panorama*, a BBC current affairs magazine, tried to show the spin doctors in a particular sinister light (Haines 1996). The same is true for Nicholas Jones, a BBC journalist who has written three books on the topic (Jones 1996, 1997, 1999). They all concentrate on the „black arts of spin doctoring“ and try to get „behind the spin“ – an attitude that provoked some criticism. „Spin doctors have been mythologized to an absurd extent“ in Britain, said columnist Steve Richards (1998: 8). In his view, these professional „intermediaries“ are just doing their job after all.

#### **4. Spin Doctoring: Media Manipulation oder Meta Communication?**

The most typical and concrete example for meta coverage is the creation of the term spin doctor itself. The term was born, along with many techniques of public relations and the business of political consulting, in the United States. It has sinister connotations, as a manipulator, conspirator, propagandist, even a malign and evil force at the heart of the body politic. The Chamber's 21st Century Dictionary defines spin doctor as „someone, especially in politics, who tries to influence

public opinion by putting a favourable bias on information presented to the public or to the media“.

Spin doctoring is an unscientific neologism coined by journalists in order to describe the complex process of an intensifying political PR and political marketing. This process does not take place objectively, but the journalistic coverage is not always objective – it can be glorifying or mystifying. Spin doctoring is not a neutral scientific concept (such as „communication“) and it is not the self-labelling of a branch (such as „public relations“) either, but a biased and negatively rated neologism of journalists in order to discredit the work of PR experts (e.g. as „media manipulators“). The journalistic use of the term spin doctor occurs in a one-sided and problematic sense whenever it serves to discredit the legitimate interest of politicians, parties and governments in asserting themselves against an obstinate and powerful journalism whose mechanisms and motives are not at all exclusively oriented towards public welfare. It remains often concealed that journalists and the media pursue specific self-interests (Page 1996) and that participants in political PR provide essential information without which the media could not possibly serve its public task. This double-perspective is missing in the journalistic use of the term spin doctoring. The term is to be understood as an element of a journalistic counter-strategy: where political PR and marketing have developed a high degree of professionalism, journalism is developing counter-strategies in order to prove its independence. As the study of Semetko et al. (1991) demonstrated, journalists cannot ignore pseudo-events or other dramatically oriented strategies that are designed to raise public awareness. For reasons of media competition they are bound to give them coverage. In addition, they try to expose the real reason behind the reported event and to point out that it was staged. The spin doctor becomes the story. Hence, the media coverage on spin doctoring serves as the ultimate example for meta coverage. To the same extent that it is difficult to characterize what is inherently new about spin doctoring, it is obvious what is new about its formal quality: it is given media coverage (Sumpter & Tankard 1994).

Of great importance in connection with this is the tendency to expand the meaning of the term widely. In British press reports, for example, it is not confined to some few top advisers anymore but increasingly used to represent almost any kind of campaign operative (Esser et al. 2000). Once the term spin doctor was established in the public discourse, some journalists used it indiscriminately to describe all sorts of PR officials and campaign members. By doing so they themselves were putting a spin on minor stories presumably to increase readers' interest. In Ger-

many, too, journalists used the term rather loosely. For that reason and because of the different languages we use here a broader understanding of spin doctoring than is usually applied.

Our cross-country definition of spin doctors „in a broader sense“ includes non-party professional political consultants as they are now paramount in the USA; advisers and operatives from a media or PR background who are hired by parties because they know about the logic of the media system and because they are able to anticipate, to simulate, and to stimulate the actions of journalists; and experienced politicians who have built up a special knowledge of campaigning. Regarding their activities we distinguish between media-related and non-media-related tasks. Spin doctors carrying out *media-related* tasks can be defined as members of the campaign team who are in direct contact to with journalists and try to control the news media's coverage and interpretation of issues, problems, events and situations. They are the direct counterparts of journalists; their activities are part of the news management of the campaign team. Political spin doctors carrying out *non-media-related* activities fall into two sub-groups: those responsible for improving the party's own campaign and those responsible for fighting that of the opposition. The detailed work profiles of these three troops are to be discussed later (see Tables 4-6 below).

## **5. Relevance of the Study**

We want to analyse the media coverage of Spin doctors, campaign operatives and behind-the-scenes activities of image construction and political marketing within three countries in order to examine the degree of meta coverage. In the estimation of some media scholars this is a new stage in political journalism. In this context, we are interested in the question of how the trend towards modernising the political coverage has proceeded within the three countries which lately experienced very similarly designed election campaigns. The question to the fore is how sensitively the press in Germany, Britain and the United States react to objective changes within the „Third Age of Political Communication“. In this respect, one naturally must take into account the different degrees of professionalization of political publicity within the three countries.

The problem mentioned here is also important with respect to the field of media-effects. Is meta-coverage to be welcomed or criticized? Kerbel is very critical and considers it „the most cynical way“ of covering the campaign. Although reporters „are correct to note that there is something deeply disturbing about the political battle to control information“, he says, but it tends to lay bare „the manipulative efforts of campaign organizations“ and „the ugly underbelly of a

troubled system“ which will give „people reason to reach for the remote control“ (Kerbel 1997: 100-1). In his view it facilitates public cynicism but does nothing to improve it.

D'Angelo holds the precise opposite view. He questions the assumption that „individuals really do acquire a cynical sense of politics by hearing ... that political conventions are staged 'media events' or 'media spectacles' or that candidates say things or go to places to get media's attention“. He welcomes it as endeavours for „perspective-making and explanation“ that could even be considered „a self-correcting tendency in news itself, a rhetoric of accountability, if you will“ (D'Angelo 1999: 29). But before such normative questions can be addressed we first need to *expand* our knowledge of the empirical basis.

## 6. Method

To compare the coverage of spin doctoring and political marketing in the United States, Great Britain and Germany, we content-analyzed leading national quality newspapers over a period of six months prior to election day (US: 5 May to 5 November 1996; UK: 1 November 1996 to 1 May 1997; Germany: 27 March to 27 September 1998). In the United States we chose the weekday and Sunday editions of the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post and U.S. Today. In Great Britain we analyzed the Daily/Sunday Telegraph, The Times/Sunday Times, Independent/Independent on Sunday und Guardian/Observer. Since Germany does not have a tradition of Sunday newspapers, we coded four six-day newspapers (Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau) and four weekly newspapers and magazines (Welt am Sonntag, Focus, Spiegel, Woche). The German news magazines can be considered functional equivalents to the Sunday editions of the American and British papers (Esser 1999: 297). Concerning their comparability the three resulting media samples offer the greatest possible convergence that could be drawn up with regard to the different structure of the press in the three countries.

A stronger provision for tabloid papers proved unfeasible since there is no strong national tabloid press in Germany and the US. In Germany there, for example, there is only one national tabloid (Bild) which published hardly any articles on the subject (Esser & Reinemann 1999: 40). Television footage was unfortunately not available for this study. Concentrating solely on the opinion-leading quality press does in our view not pose a serious limitation to this study because (1) of those newspapers we analyzed every relevant article employing an exhaustive sampling

plan; (2) we were more interested in differences between countries than in differences between media; (3) the opinion-leading quality press more or less mirrors and instigates the coverage of other media outlets such as tabloids and television.

Each article was coded that mentioned terms such as spin doctor, communication consultants, campaign strategists, media strategists and corresponding expressions (synonyms). News agency copy was excluded from the analysis. All those persons were categorized as spin doctors who (1) were described by the word spin doctor, communication consultants, campaign strategists, media strategists, etc. or to whom (2) were ascribed activities of spin doctoring in a broader sense (see Tables 1 and 2 below). This could apply to professional experts brought in only for the time of the campaign or to long-term party politicians with special knowledge in campaigning.

A computer method (see Fan, 1994) was used to retrieve the American and British newspaper articles from a full text electronic database, NEXIS. The programme retrieved every article that included at least one of the above stated search words. The German articles were selected and photocopied from the original papers. All items were first checked by the authors for their relevance for the study and then hand-coded by four trained coders. The coders were fluent in both languages and familiar with the political background of the three elections. The full coding scheme is available from the authors.

## **7. Results**

### **7.1 Amount of coverage**

There are huge differences in the amount of coverage on spin doctors (in a broad sense as explained above) in Germany, Great Britain and the U.S.. During the six months up to election day, the German papers published 169 articles in which spin doctors were mentioned. These articles contained 217 spin doctor references. The British papers carried 444 articles with 527 spin doctor references and the American papers 464 articles with 647 spin doctor references. Although the conditions of the British and German general elections were quite similar, the amount of the coverage of spin doctoring varied enormously. In both countries, the new centre-left parties of Blair and Schroeder were said to have brazenly copied the Clinton style. This seems to have caused more concern among British than German journalists.

The British papers' coverage of spin doctoring focused mainly on Blair's Labour Party, as Figure 1 illustrates. This is a clear reaction to the professionalization of Labour's campaigning

which has become known as the "Clintonization" of British political party PR (Michie 1998: 282). The party's fundamental transformation and Labour's copying of Democrat techniques quickly made its campaign strategists an interesting subject to report about. The British Conservatives, on the other hand, "without resorting to the Clintonized approach, failed to recognize that the nature of the game had changed – and were hopelessly outgunned in the 1997 elections as a result" (Michie 1998: 283).

-- Figure 1 here --

A very different picture emerges in Germany: 43% of all spin doctor references in the German papers referred to the sluggish, old-world campaign of Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), 41% to the slick campaign of Gerhard Schröder's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and 16% to other smaller parties.<sup>2</sup> Although the SPD campaigners were downright keen to make their new "American" campaign techniques an issue in the media (Mueller 1998: 24, 39, 57), the German journalists felt more attracted to the mistakes and criticism of the CDU campaign. The relatively high amount of references to spin doctors of other, smaller parties can be explained by the German multi-party-system and the necessity to form coalitions.

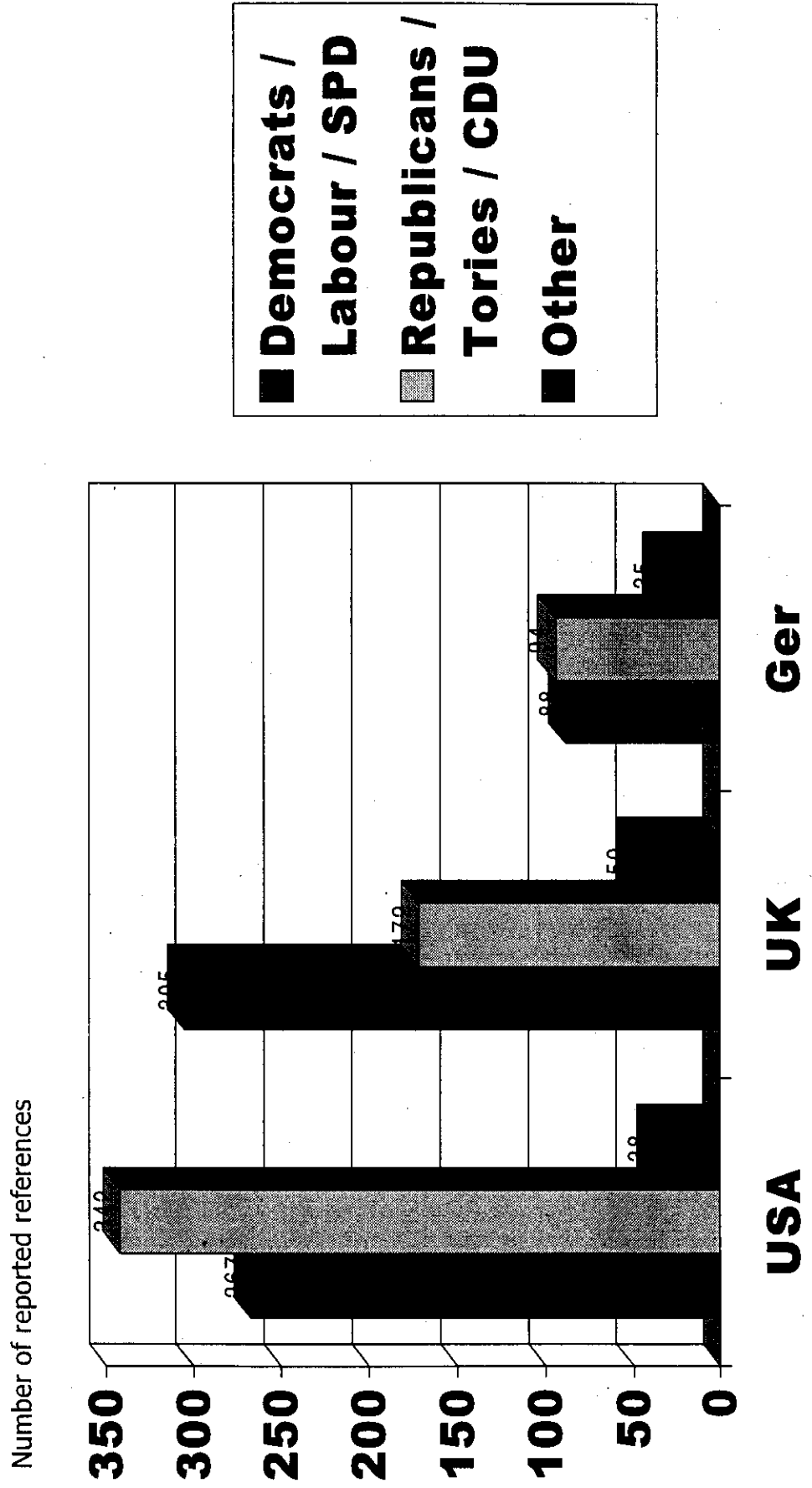
Interestingly, the U.S. picture resembles the German one, although the American coverage was much more intense. 53% of all spin doctor references referred to the Dole campaign and only 41% to the Clinton campaign. This distribution can be explained by the Dole team's difficulties with its campaign staff and the constant disputes about the right strategy which were often leaked to the press. News reports repeatedly discussed Dole's inability to generate enthusiasm, his lack of a clear message, and disorder in his campaign organization (Just, 1997: 94).

In summing up, there are at least four possible explanations for the different patterns of coverage in the three countries:

1. The higher amount of coverage in the U.S. papers is the result of a longer tradition of political consulting during which journalists have started to appreciate spin doctors as an interesting and reliable source of information; whereas the higher amount of coverage in the British press is primarily the result of the professionalization of Labour campaigning which many

Figure 1

# Party affiliation of spin doctors



journalists would never have thought them capable of. Therefore it became a fascinating topic for journalists.

2. The higher frequency of the term spin doctor mentioned in the U.S. and Great Britain reflects the fact that in the American and British national election campaigns more spin doctors were involved or played a more important role than in Germany. This could be a result of the differing strength of political parties in the three countries. In the U.S., political consultants have already taken over the role of parties during election campaigns. In Britain, a similar process seems to be taking place, at least during campaign times. Tony Blair set up his personal campaign team that consisted of people who were detested by many people within the Labour Party (e.g. Peter Mandelson). In Germany, Schroeder was not involved in the campaign preparations at all (as opposed to Helmut Kohl who was in absolute control of all campaign decisions). Nevertheless, the party organizations in Germany are still strong, which might have prevented spin doctors from playing a major role in campaign coverage.

3. The higher number of spin doctor mentions in the U.S. and British press is a consequence of the fact that American and British journalists are more interested in the strategic behind-the-scenes side and the media-politics relationship than their German colleagues. This is related to the fact that British and U.S. journalists are more open about the activities of spin doctors while German journalists tend to withhold the degree of campaign and news management from their readers. One reason for this could be that they do use confidential material but treat it as anonymous because they do not want to convey the image of being passive transmitters of PR-information.

4. The higher number of articles on the Republicans' and CDU team (as compared to the Democrats' and SPD campaign respectively) reflect the fact that they delivered an imperfect campaign which the press was happy to report on. That would indicate that crisis and defeat are still of higher news value than effective political marketing.

It is impossible to give a definite explanation for the different patterns but it seems sensible to assume that all five reasons apply to a certain degree.

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<sup>2</sup> The three small parties in the German Bundestag are the Free Democratic Party (FDP), a long-time coalition partner of Helmut Kohl's CDU; the Greens, now in a governing coalition with Gerhard Schroeder's SPD; and the Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor of the East German Communist Party.

## 7.2 Spin doctors in campaign articles: Meta Coverage or Normal Source?

There are two ways in which spin doctors can become part of campaign coverage. In other words they can have two different functions in an article: First, spin doctors can be the object of an article. This is the case when spin-doctors or their activities are reported on from a higher viewpoint giving background and reflection about their role and influence on the candidate, campaign, or media. Articles in which spin doctors are the object of journalese observation are typical examples of meta coverage. Secondly, spin doctors can also be the source of campaign information. This is the case when spin doctors give statements and comment on the candidates' actions, their positions on issues, their campaign strategy or when they criticize a political opponent.

Articles in which spin doctors are treated as a source of coverage do rarely include analysis or reflection about their roles and goals. More often, such articles will include several word by word citations without the journalist commenting on them. This is not meta coverage. In our analysis we categorized each article according to whether the spin doctors mentioned were primarily the object of the article (= meta communication), or the source (= as aprt of the classical strategic coverage), or both object and source. This analytical distinction allows us to see whether journalists of the three countries treated spin doctors as ordinary news sources (lesser detachment) or as a phenomenon that has to be explained to their readers (greater detachment).

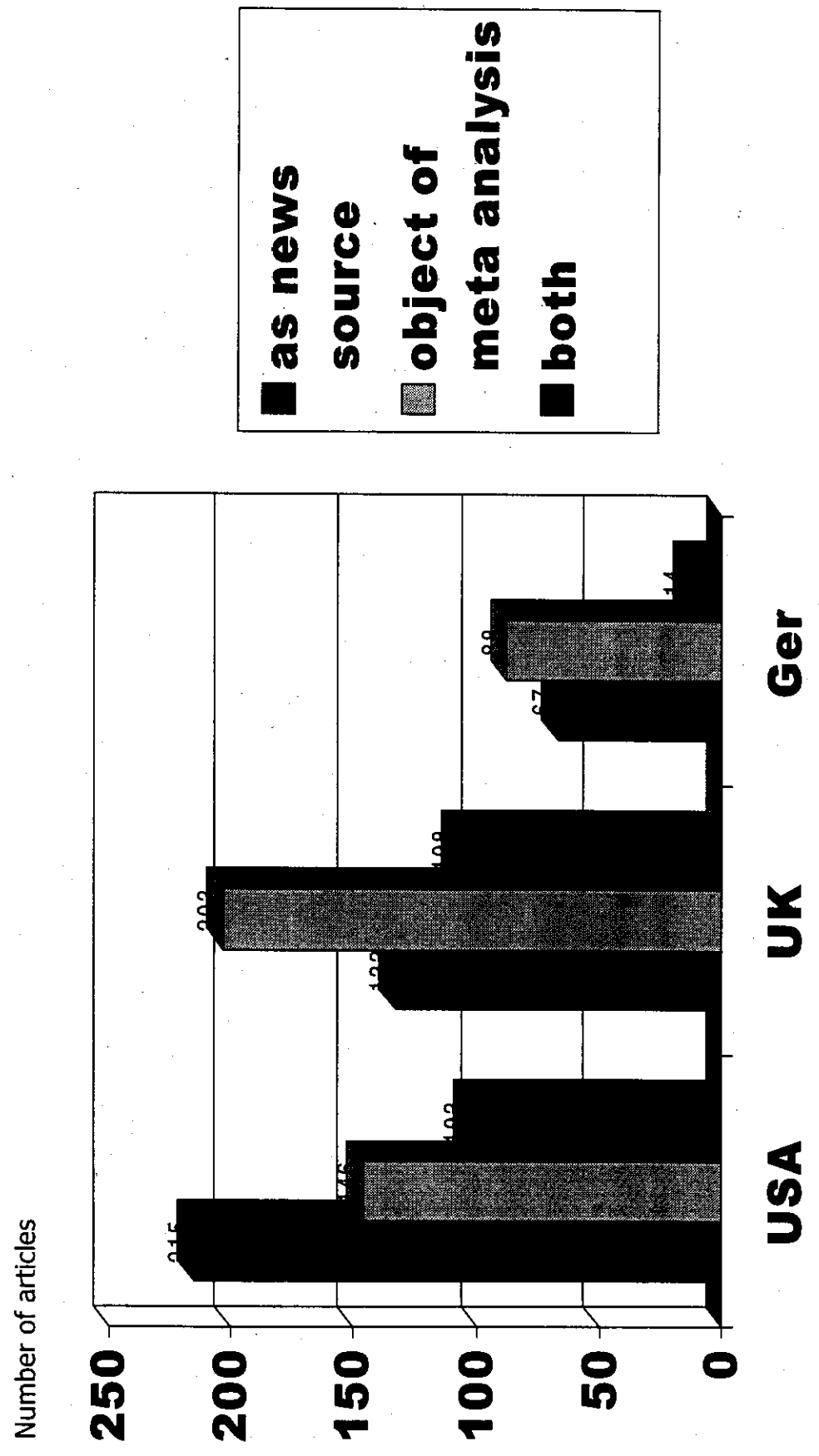
-- Figure 2 here --

The results in Figure 2 clearly indicate that German and British journalists reported in a more detached fashion about spin doctors than did their U.S. colleagues. The largest share of the German and British articles treated them as objects whereas the largest share of the American articles used them as sources. Journalists in the United States seem more readily prepared to accept spin doctors as a legitimate source of information and comment and as a legitimate part of the "horse-race". This reflects again the longer tradition of spin doctoring and political consulting in the United States. The low German figure for 'spin doctors as a source' stems not only from the fact that this phenomenon is most recent there. It has also to do with the fact that word by word citations are not as common a feature in German as in Anglo-Saxon press journalism.

The high British figure for 'spin doctors as an object' reflects the determination and persistence of Labours' PR strategists to get their message across that the party's programmatic profile

Figure 2

# Spin doctors: Meta or Source?



has changed fundamentally and secondly to break the long-time conservative bias of the British press (Gould, 1998). Their methods to attain these goals were made a media issue time and again. German spin doctors did not employ similar proactive campaign techniques and therefore attracted less media attention (Esser et al. 2000). The high U.S. figure for 'spin doctors as a source' reflects the fact that political consulting is a business here and consultants often wish to see their names in the news. In Britain and Germany spin doctors are still subject to party discipline which allows only very few of them to seek public attention.

Referring to the concept of meta communication, the results in figure 2 allude to the fact that this is not a new type of media coverage taking the place of an old one. Meta coverage rather appears to be a new development supplementing the still dominant type of strategy coverage. In this, it becomes obvious that meta coverage is a journalistic defense strategy that reacts to new developments: in the USA, where spin doctors are no longer considered as something new, they already appear to be normal, thus being woven into the usual media coverage.

### **7.3 The activities of spin doctors**

What kind of activities do journalists attribute to spin doctors (in a broad sense including communication consultants and campaign strategists)? How above board are journalists in Germany, Great Britain and the United States towards their readers? Which activities of the spin doctors are covered and which are not? In this respect we distinguish between activities related directly to the media and those not directly related to the media. The latter category includes tasks aimed at improving the party's own campaign and fighting that of the opposition. Undoubtedly, these categories overlap to a certain extent for the strongest measures of fighting the opponent are measures that work through the media. But by coding the news reports carefully it was possible to distinguish clearly between three areas of responsibility: (1) activities directly related to the media, (2) activities aimed at improving the party's own campaign, and (3) activities aimed at fighting the campaign of the opposition (see Tables 4-6).

-- Tables 4-6 here --

In each article, it was possible to code up to four activities for each campaign team. The unit to be analysed is not the article, but the individual activities mentioned in an article. There

# Dealing with the media

<b>Reported activities (%)</b>	<b>USA N=635</b>	<b>UK N=364</b>	<b>Germany N=107</b>
Explaining own strategy to journalists	39	18	40
Explaining political issues and positions	7	8	8
Explaining candidate's statements/actions	24	17	5
Informing or exclusive briefing of journalists	19	25	15
Misinforming, intimidating, criticizing journalists	3	13	7
Preventing negative coverage through spin control (by criticizing, threatening...)	0	11	2
Media monitoring	2	5	2
Media related activities in general, unspecific	6	3	20

were two possibilities by which a certain activity could be coded. Either it was explicitly attributed to the spin doctors by the journalist or it could be deduced from the article by the coder.

The American newspapers covered more than 1341 spin doctor activities, the British more than 874, and the German more than 355 (see Table 4-6). It is to be noted that the American and British newspapers paid much higher attention to media-related activities than the German. Whereas in the USA 47% and in the UK 42% of all spin doctor activities covered refer to their interaction with journalists, only 30% did so in Germany (107 out of 355). This is a further indication that reflective, self-analytical reporting does not yet play an important role in Germany as much as in Anglo-American countries. Meta coverage in Germany is still in a state of development. The German readers have not learned much about the role of spin doctors and campaign operatives yet.

This applies especially for media-related activities (Table 4). The German media did not tell their audience anything substantial about this important internal relationship between spin doctors and journalists. Especially the classic spin doctor activity „explaining the candidate’s statements and actions to journalists“ is hardly existent in the German press. In comparison, the category “media-related activities in general without specifications” is the most frequently mentioned. This underlines how vague and meaningless the German coverage of this sensitive field still is. In Great Britain and the USA, journalists cover classic spin doctor tasks such as „explaining candidate’s statements and actions to journalists“. And „informing and exclusive briefing of journalists“. The British coverage, however, shows two unusual deviations: British journalists felt obliged to report intensively on cases of „misinforming or intimidating journalists“ and „preventing negative coverage through spin control e.g. by threatening journalists“. Referring to the two latter aspects, there were reports about the attempt of Labour’s electoral campaign headquarters to influence a BBC-vote by calling repeatedly to have Tony Blair made ‘Man of the Year’ or reports about Labour’s and Tory’s headquarters complaining to television news programmes or newspaper editors about an allegedly unbalanced or unfair news coverage.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. see Mark Lawson ‘Mediawatch: It Would Leave A Saatchi Gasping’ The Guardian of 22 April 1997 p. 18; Andrew Culf ‘Tories Accuse BBC of Labour Bias’ The Guardian of 3 March 1997 p. 2; Martin Kettle ‘Which Voters Count?’ The Guardian of 8 Feb 1997 p. 19; Nick Cohen ‘Hold on a Minute: Joyless Spin Doctors Dish Out Misery to Seekers After Truth’ The Guardian of 16 Feb 1997 p. 26; Alice Thomson, ‘The Saturday Profile - Alastair Campbell’ Daily Telegraph of 5 April 1997 p. 14; Greg Neale, ‘Even Left finds bias in TV news bulletins’ Sunday Telegraph of 30 March 1997 p. 11; Janet Daley ‘How the Left speaks out while using your name’ Daily Telegraph of 17 Dec 1996 p. 18; John Simpson ‘Repulsive, but right’ Sunday Telegraph of 17 Nov 1996 p. 1. See also Jones (1996; 1997; 1999).

# Fighting the opposition campaign

Table 5

<b>Reported activities (%)</b>	<b>USA N=236</b>	<b>UK N=121</b>	<b>Germany N=51</b>
Criticizing the political opponent, e.g. negative campaigning	79	53	76
Rapid response	10	26	10
Opposition research	4	18	4
Other activities concerning the oppositional campaign	7	2	10

Before polling day, the British Labour Party's campaign and communication director Peter Mandelson announced that his party would be 'fighting a war on the air and on the ground [...] fighting the battle of the airwaves, as well as in the press' (quoted in Jones, 1997: 12). In an interview with the Guardian Mandelson said: 'I'm trying to create the truth – if that's news management I plead guilty' (quoted in Jones, 1999: 31). Obviously, the intensive coverage by British journalists was at least partly induced by scepticism and disapproval towards the attempts of the spin doctors to exert influence.

In Great Britain, the highest amount of aggressiveness of the coverage of spin doctors also indicates the activities aimed at „fighting the opposition campaign“ (Table 5). Exceptionally intensive was the selection of „rapid response“ and „opposition research“ as a central theme. This produced a much higher awareness in Great Britain than in both of the other countries in the comparison. However, an important parallel shows when looking at „negative campaigning“. In all three countries, this is an important task attributed to spin doctors (Table 5).

The existing picture is also confirmed on observing the media coverage of activities aimed at improving the spin doctors' own campaign (Table 6). Again, the profile of the German spin doctors was the least distinctive. The majority of all reported activities in Germany (126 = 64%) fall to the share of "strategic consulting". This result is attributed to the fact that the spin doctors of German parties are in many cases merely labelled as "electoral campaign strategists" without making further, more precise statements on their activities. Other activities, such as "speeches or public appearance consulting" or "opinion polling" hardly play a role within news coverage. Within news coverage, minimalistic commonplaces without any closer characterization predominated. The British and US papers presented a much more detailed picture on "speeches, debate and image consulting": There were many more reports about how events and public appearances of politicians were staged and what role hidden consultants played backstage. The same was true for "opinion polling": It attracted much more attention in Britain and the United States although the German SPD also did extensive opinion polling – but German journalists have not discovered it as a topic yet. What is remarkable in the British press is the high number of reports on the issue that "disciplining their own camp" is an important duty of the spin doctors (48 mentions = 48%). Above all, this refers to the efforts of Mandelson and Campbell to keep all Labour-representatives "on message" and to keep critics from within the party quiet. It was to this purpo-

Table 6

# Improving the own campaign

Reported activities (%)	USA		UK		Germany	
	N=470	N=389	N=389	N=197	N=197	N=197
Strategic consulting	38	22	64			
Speeches-, debate-, image consulting	19	39	5			
Political advertising	20	10	19			
Opinion polling: Focus groups, surveys	11	11	1			
Disciplining own camp, keeping members „on message“	2	12	3			
Other activities for own campaign	10	5	9			

se that the order was given to “synchronize” every interview with the electoral campaign headquarters (see Jones 1997; Franklin 1998).

To conclude: (1) British and American journalists deal much more intensively and distinctively with spin doctoring than their German colleagues. The least well informed readers about the duties of spin doctors and electoral campaign managers are to be found in Germany. Often, merely superficial commonplaces or blatant terms are used, differentiated information on the actual method of political campaigners was an absolute exception. The American coverage was primarily characterized by the literal quotation of spin doctors’ statements. There, spin doctors are covered by the media predominantly as sources of information and commentary. The British coverage was primarily characterized by the critical discussion of their style of work. This is especially clearly demonstrated by a detail-analysis of the evaluation of spin doctors. British journalists judged the activities as well as the persons much more negatively than their American and German colleagues (see Table 7). They regard them as a threat to the freedom of the press and the political culture. It shows however that the British and also the American journalists judged the spin doctors as „competent“ and „useful for campaign success“. In contrast, the German election campaign strategists were in the eyes of journalists neither competent nor effective. This referred however mostly to the campaign activists of Helmut Kohl’s CDU (Table 7).

-- Table 7 --

(2) The different frequency of media coverage seems to reflect the actual differences in political campaigning. Particularly striking is the frequent mention of the “disciplining in their own camp, of the party members” in British news coverage, that earned Tony Blair and his men the reputation of being “control freaks”. Also the intensive coverage on “misinformation” and “preventing negative coverage” can be plausibly traced back to the aggressive style of operating of Labour spin doctors. The “disciplining of their own camp” in the U.S. is inherently of less importance because of the concentration on the candidate. He forms his campaign team according to his own personal ideas and acts to a great extent independently from the party. Many of the measures mentioned are in Germany of scarcely any importance because the relationship of spin doctors and journalists is less antagonistic, but more symbiotic. Thus, the conditions in Germany point to the assumption that the important group activities in the background – unofficial meetings

Table 7

# Evaluation of spin doctors

Aspects evaluated (n)	USA	UK	Germany
Consequences for political culture			
Positive	9	-	-
Negative	19	80	3
Consequences for freedom of the press			
Positive	1	1	-
Negative	2	28	1
Usefulness for campaign success			
Positive	26	21	5
Negative	16	24	13
Character of Spin doctors			
Positive	9	28	4
Negative	17	51	22
Competence of spin doctors			
Positive	35	83	18
Negative	27	84	58

of politicians and journalists – work strikingly well and therefore make some spin doctor activities unnecessary (Mueller 1999: 52; Pfetsch 1998: 84). The marginal role played by the “explaining of the candidate’s statements and actions” in Germany hints at the circumstance that elections in Great Britain and the U.S. have become far more candidate-centred than in Germany where the parties still play a dominant role.

## **8. Summary and conclusions**

The study to hand starts from the assumption that since the Nineties a new development in political journalism has emerged, that can be labelled meta communication. Meta coverage is a new form of political communication in which news media are turning the spotlight inward in their coverage. Here the press self-referentially and self-consciously diverges from its customary role as a conduit of information to report on how it is an actor on the campaign stage.

Meta coverage is a reaction to two different facts: (1) On the one hand, the fact that political actors and news sources all adopt the logic of the media. Reporters realize that journalism is increasingly reporting about itself for most events are staged for the media in order to be covered by the media (Altheide & Snow 1991). But meta coverage can not only be explained as a post-modern move of skeptical, cynical journalists but also as a conclusive response to fundamental changes in the political publicity process. The intensified professionalization of political publicity leads to an analytical but also increasingly adversarial perspective among journalists (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999). When they perceive professional PR as an attempt on their professional autonomy and independence, this can result in stories about the machinery and specific instances of news management and media management – in a word meta coverage.

Against this background, coverage of spin doctoring has to be seen as a prime example of meta coverage. Spin doctoring is the unscientific neologism coined by journalists in order to describe the complex process of an intensifying political PR and political marketing. For that reason, we analyzed the media coverage about spin doctors, campaign operatives and behind-the-scenes activities of image construction and political marketing in three countries: United States, Great Britain, and Germany. These countries were chosen because the Modernization concept assumes that the trends described here will not win through uniformly but will emerge in response to local developments and needs. The question to the fore is how this trend towards modernising the political coverage has proceeded within the three countries which lately experienced

very similarly designed election campaigns. The topic to be examined was, how sensitively the press in Germany, Britain and the United States react to objective changes within the „Third Age of Political Communication“.

Our analysis demonstrated that the degree of meta coverage first and foremost depends on the political PR and marketing practice in the respective countries. In Germany, both were applied to a lesser extent and as a consequence, the media covered it the least. The CDU led a very traditional, old world campaign and the SPD, although copying many elements of the Blair-campaign, applied them only very moderately. In Great Britain, 'spin doctoring high gear' predominated, in Germany it was 'spin doctoring low gear' (Esser et al. 2000). This led to a completely different journalistic handling of this new form of political campaign PR. The moderate use of news management and political marketing in Germany is to be traced back to the less antagonistic media culture. The German media systems lacks a strong and aggressive tabloid press which has to be seen as an autonomous power in the political process as is the case in Britain. The American media is regarded as even more antagonistic. American journalism is characterized by an unleashed antipolitics bias and adversarial and arrogant attitudes toward political institutions (Patterson 1994). "No wonder political actors in general and the executive in particular invest huge resources and intelligence in media-centered styles of news management. In other words, if the media culture is shaped by a general tone of mistrust of political institutions and by adversarial role models in news making, news managers will have to try harder to influence the media." (Pfetsch 1998: 87) The present study provided evidence that this development has reached Britain as well.

The British journalists react by far the most critically to the professionalisation of political PR. These results underline that meta coverage i.e. the selection of spin doctoring as a media topic is a journalistic defence strategy: where political PR and marketing practice have developed a high degree of professionalism, journalism is developing counter-strategies in order to prove its independence. In doing so, there appear to be different dynamic forces within the countries analysed: in Great Britain, the meta coverage was intensive for the phenomenon was new and aggressively employed. In the USA, the meta coverage was the most intensive because there the phenomenon has been known longest. However, American journalists seem to have made peace with the spin doctors for they quote often them on-the-record and judge them the most positively. In Germany, meta coverage and behind the scene perspective does not seem to have been recognized

as an original topic of media coverage. This makes it clear how this new type of media coverage depends on concrete contextual factors: the sharpness of political PR and the media culture.

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