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Spin Doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany

Metacommunication about Media Manipulation

Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, and David Fan

This study develops a new concept in political communication theory called metacommunication. It argues that metacommunication (1) describes a new, third stage in election coverage after issue and strategy coverage; (2) reflects the mass media's new role as a political institution in the third age of political communication; and (3) can be seen as the news media's response to a new, third force in news making: professional political PR. Metacommunication is defined as the news media's self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism. While metacoverage can take two forms, self-referential news and process news, the present study puts the main emphasis on the latter. It argues that the coverage of campaign strategists and spin doctors can be seen as a prime example of metadiscursive process news. A cross-country content analysis of "spin doctors in the press" reveals different profiles of metacoverage in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany that can be explained by the different media cultures and political PR cultures. While metacoverage is discussed as a new style of reporting to be welcomed in the view of professionalized political PR, journalism is inherently limited in analyzing PR adequately.

A New Stage of Political Journalism: Metacoverage

Political journalism is not static but rather in a permanent state of development. Patterson (1994: chap. 2) analyzed the political coverage of U.S. election campaigns and distinguished two phases of political journalism: issue and strategy 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, and their words carried the story (see Table 1).

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Table 1

Developmental stages of political journalism

Issue Coverage since 1900	Strategic Coverage since 1972	Metacoverage since 1988
Policy schema	Game schema	Behind-the-scenes schema
Descriptive framework	Interpretive framework	Self-analytical framework
Neutral reporting	Assertive reporting	Reflexive reporting on "process"
Politicians as main sources	Journalists as main sources	Spin doctors as news source
Focus on policy issues	Focus on campaign controversies	Focus on media manipulation

Source: Adapted from Patterson (1994: chap. 2) and Kerbel (1999: chap. 3).

Then, a "quiet revolution" took place in contemporary American journalism (Patterson 1994:68). 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: chap. 2) and Jamieson (1992: chap. 7) called "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; and (6) strong emphasis on opinion polls and the candidates' standing in them (Cappella and Jamieson 1997:33).

The 1988 U.S. presidential election can be seen as the watershed for a third stage of political journalism: metacoverage (D'Angelo 1999; Kerbel 1998: chap. 3; 1999: chap. 3). 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 one of the actors on the campaign stage. By focusing on the media's own role, campaign journalists "meta-communicate the awareness that they are being manipulated and attempt to publicly deconstruct its purpose" (D'Angelo 1999:6). Metacoverage can, therefore, be defined as self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism. By doing so, journalists no longer stay on the balconies watching and reporting the strategic warfare between two campaign teams, but rather assume an active role on the campaign stage "by writing themselves into the story" (Kerbel 1999:89). Although the degree of self-analysis varies greatly, such stories usually comment on the process of reporting an election and on the role of the media in that process: "The story of the campaign is the story of the media in the campaign" (Kerbel 1998:46).

During the twentieth century, American campaign journalism went through three fundamental stages (see Table 1). In the period of *issue* orientation, the press tried to answer the question, What are the candidate's issues and what would his or her victory mean for public policy and the average voter? Over time, this approach was increasingly undermined by a *strategic* frame asking, How are the candidates running their campaign, and what does that say about their likelihood of winning? Campaign coverage has now reached a *meta* level where reporters ask, How do the campaign handlers try to use the media for their own ends and how are we covering the election anyway? Several observers have characterized this development as logically consistent. Stebenne (1993:88) called the increase in self-analysis and self-criticism "a logical outgrowth" of the grown emphasis on the political process and of the growing sense of the media's central role within that process. Kerbel (1999:87) described the proliferation of self-referential coverage as part of "a natural progression" that began in the 1970s, when the U.S. news media—as a consequence of electoral, party, and campaign finance reform (Patterson 1994: chap. 1)—started to gradually replace the political parties as the most important link between the public and the candidates. Given the dramatic increase in importance of press, television, and information technologies in all parts of society, it is obvious that political reporters gradually began to take notice of the emerging importance of the media as a political tool. A transition from strategy to metacoverage followed. Especially the growing use of insider jargon, such as "spin," "spots," "stand-ups," and "sound-bites," reveals the increasing tendency of the media to cover itself in its own terms. The inner workings of the medium have become a commonplace part of its story.

Two Types of Metacommunication: Self-referential News and Process News

Metacommunication in today's election coverage takes two forms: self-referential news and process news. The first type, *self-coverage*, describes the tendency for reporters and media decision makers to turn the spotlight inward and to treat themselves as the subjects of their own political stories. In such stories, journalists reveal a certain degree of self-awareness and self-analysis by making their presence and involvement an issue in their reporting. While researchers in the past often complained about the media's reluctance to report on their influence in society, a new line of research is now accumulating evidence that the media are increasingly examining their role in the political process during elections (Johnson et al. 1996; D'Angelo 1999). One of several indicators is the growing number of media beats, media columns, and media pages in U.S., British, and German newspapers. The level of analysis, if at all, varies: many media-on-media stories may not be self-diagnostic at all but simply reflect a tendency for

journalists, politicians, and media celebrities to live in a “cocoon” or “bubble”—be it Washington or Hollywood—that promotes self-interest in and fascination with each other. At other times, the mere mentioning of an issue or scandalous allegation as being “in the news” may serve as a strategy to talk up its news value and justify further reports on it. Johnson et al. (1996) distinguished several story types that match our understanding of self-referential news:

- *Media performance stories* evaluate how well the media cover the campaign, discussing such issues as whether coverage of a candidate is fair or whether the media pay enough attention to issues.
- *Media impact stories* examine the power of press reporting, television images, and campaign advertising and how the media influence voters or the ways in which candidates conduct their campaigns.
- *Media coverage of campaign issues* is a category for those stories that discuss the news media’s attention or fascination with nonsubstantive campaign topics such as a candidate’s image, character, private life, or public appearance gaffes—and whether the news media should run such soft-news or scandalizing stories.
- *Media coverage of policy issues* describes stories that discuss media attention to substantive policy positions of candidates on major questions of how government should or should not act. This includes media stories on how candidates use “issue spots” in their ad campaigns to advance their candidacy or to attack their opponents.

A second type of metacoverage is process news—reports about the backstage maneuvers of campaign operatives to guide or influence journalists. *Process stories* or statements focus less on the performance and perceptions of the reporters themselves (as in self-referential news) and more on the strategies, stage-crafting, and spin doctors employed by candidates to control information. While both types of metacoverage examine the origins of the modern political publicity process, self-referential news concentrates more on the media’s role, and process news more on the campaign operatives’ role—especially their public relations and news management activities. McNair (2000) characterized process coverage as dealing mainly with the technical issues of political communication, such as the conduct and influence of marketing, advertising, opinion polling, image signifiers, and “how messages are spun and stories manufactured” (p. 50). The largest empirical study on campaign process coverage—in the way as it is understood here—comes from Kerbel (1998: chap. 3). He identified several story-type categories that mainly center on the candidate-media relationship:

- *Campaign behavior stories* are about attempts by candidates or campaign operatives to advance their cause in a media-dominated election game. This includes (1) efforts to construct a favorable public image by staging events, running campaign ads, timing activities conveniently for television, selecting attractive

backdrops for presentations, and so on. This also includes (2) reports about attempts to influence media coverage behind the scenes by creating and marketing campaign ads, staging rallies and getting a candidate's supporters in the news, and so on.

- *Candidate motivation* stories present reporters' theories about why a candidate acted in a particular way. Such "theorizing" often centers on the same hypothesis: candidates' actions are explainable best in terms of political ambition for which media attention is of utmost importance.
- *Candidate-press relation* stories relate specifically to direct interactions between the campaign team and the media. Such "relational" process references often portray *conflict* between the press corps and the campaign. The focus here is less on the candidates' action to influence news coverage (which would be coded as *campaign behavior* stories) and more on how it feels for the reporter to experience it and what it means for their battled relationship. Although these stories have a clear media viewpoint, they are often written from a supposedly nonparticipant third-person standpoint—referring to the media as "they," "them," or simply "the press."

Both self-coverage and process coverage are closely related in theory and practice. They often appear in the same story and have often been examined together in the same study (Johnson et al., 1996; Kerbel 1997; 1998: chap. 3). While there is no full consensus on the precise concept of metacommunication, U.S. scholars agree that such coverage has increased in the United States. Working with a rather narrow definition, Johnson et al. (1996) found 8 percent of all 1992 election stories focusing on the media. Johnson et al. ascertained that it is "a small but important" type of campaign coverage but suspect that their study "underrepresents" its occurrence due to strict coding definitions (p. 665). A broader, more comprehensive analysis by Kerbel found 20 percent of meta-coverage in the 1992 and 25 percent in the 1996 U.S. presidential election coverage (Kerbel 1998:37; Kerbel et al. 2000:17). Bennett (1992:35, 191), using the broadest definition of all, reported that in the 1988 presidential election "two thirds," and in the 1990 congressional election "nearly every campaign story," made reference to some aspect of the media: marketing strategies, media manipulation techniques, political advertising, or the role of television.

Interestingly, the development of metacommunication filtering into ordinary news reporting coincides with a critical shift in the way communication scholars think about the function of the mass media in modern society. At the same time, as reporters are increasingly calling attention to their own role in covering major events (not only elections but also scandals),¹ several communication scholars from the United States, Great Britain, and Germany have proposed to reevaluate our understanding of the news media and to view them as "political actors" (Eilders 2000; Norris et al. 1999; Osborne 1999; Page 1996a) or "political institutions" (Cook 1998; Jarren 1996; Sparrow 1999).

The News Media As a Political Institution

Treating the press as a political institution is a new theoretical approach in political communication research (Owen 1999). Its main thesis is that the news media fulfill a pivotal political role and are as much a part of the process of governing as are political parties and interest groups—and should therefore be studied and, ultimately, treated as such. A simplified version of the complex argument (cf. Cook 1998) goes as follows: news media are not independent, disengaged bystanders who just chronicle political and governmental affairs as complete outsiders but are, in fact, a political institution. *Political* because they facilitate communication between the three constitutional branches (executive, legislative, judiciary) and foster “government by publicity” in their role as liaison between governmental actors and citizens. Today, state leaders, members of parliament, and other government officials have all adopted media strategies, and thereby they allowed journalistic norms to influence the process of governance. Press relations cannot be separated anymore from policymaking. According to Cook (1998), “Media strategies become increasingly useful means for political actors to pursue governance—and become an increasing focus of their attention and activities—as the disjuncture between the power of those [political] actors and the expectations placed on them [by the public] grows” (p. 118). The theoretical point is how deeply journalism is implicated in the normal process of governance. The contemporary emphasis on political public relations and spin control reflects the intertwining of journalism with politics particularly well: statecraft and stagecraft go hand in hand. It is important to point out, however, that the media are no weak-willed tool of the powerful. They sometimes use their publications and broadcasts in an active and unified fashion to shape political discourse to their own purposes and to pursue policy objectives on their own (Page 1996a:20; 1996b:116).

The second, arguably more controversial factor of this new theoretical approach is to view the news media as a single *institution*, not merely a collection of politically significant organizations. According to this view, the processes of news production and news content are so similar across organizations that it is justifiable to treat them as a collective institution. Because of a largely agreed-upon set of production values and a unified set of expectations and roles, the mainstream news organizations—as of yet—qualify for the definition of institution (Cook 1998:70; Sparrow 1999:17).² If this complex and provocative argument is correct, the news media constitute an institution apart from, but in the middle of, government and politics. This leaves the media with a dilemma: as a political institution, it ends up in the middle of what it covers—which poses a long string of theoretical and practical problems; as a political institution, people may apply a much higher—and very different—standard to evaluate the media’s

role in society than they did before, in particular with regard to media performance (capability) and media power (accountability). One of the conclusions drawn from these insights is that journalists should think more deeply about their responsibilities, position, and impact in society and reflect on it in their coverage. Cook (1998) reported that “journalists need to deal more constructively with their own involvement and power in . . . politics” (p. 175). While public journalism is being discussed as one possible solution, metacoverage is obviously another.

The News Shapers: A Third Force in News Making

This study views the media as a distinct social institution that acts apart from, but in the middle of, politics. Unlike the constitutionally defined branches—executive, legislative, and judiciary—the news media are one of several intermediary institutions, similar to political parties and interest groups. Although theoretically independent, the institutions of politics and the media have come to participate in each other’s routines and practices. This process represents a new challenge to both communication scholars and working journalists. While scientists prefer clear conceptual boundaries between theoretical entities, journalists prefer to see their profession as an independent Fourth Estate, clearly separated from other (political) powerhouses in society. Both these views may not be appropriate anymore as modern democracies, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, enter the “third age of political communication” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), in which the traditional and relatively stable relationship between the media and the political actors has become so complex, intertwined, fragmented, and chaotic that it is time for “rethinking the study of political communication” (Blumler and Gurevitch 2000). For a long string of reasons, it has become increasingly difficult—and at the same time increasingly important—for government leaders and vote-seeking politicians to communicate effectively to the electorate through the mass media.³ This cannot be achieved anymore without professional assistance of skilled personnel who have assumed responsibility for proactive news management, campaign and message design, and research-based political marketing. These new recruits with their specific media skills and ready access to the head of states “are the new elites of Anglo-American politics, the products of media-saturated style of politics” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999:213). Their emergence in between the two spheres of media and politics is a clear signal that the political publicity process has changed fundamentally. These political PR strategists, or spin doctors—some with journalism backgrounds but now employed by political actors—operate at the porous borders of both institutions. They are of importance for politicians because (1) they know about the logic of the media; (2) they are able to anticipate, simulate, and stimulate the actions of journalists; and (3) they know how to control and

dominate the news agenda. These specialist political consultants occupy “a new role” in modern media-driven democracies (Blumler 1997:398) and now work at “the center” of politics (Fallows 1997:187). They hold a new and powerful position: “These strategic communicators, or news shapers, constitute a third force in news making” (Manheim 1998:96). They are active in many countries and many parts of society, applying scientific methods of persuasive political communication to shape and target messages to maximize their desired impact while minimizing undesired collateral effects (Esser et al. 2000; Mancini 1999; Manheim 1998).

Communication scholars were not the only ones who noticed this new force in news making. As they respond to this development with new approaches in their work, so do political journalists. This study starts from the assumption that the news media—as a collective institution—react to their changing role as a powerful political actor with an increase in self-referential metacommunication and to the new powerful role of political PR strategists with an increase in metadiscursive process news. The main difference between academic and journalistic reactions is that the latter are less systematic, self-aware, and analytical (if at all). Acknowledging that both types of metacoverage are closely related and equally important, the present study focuses on process news: how do the news media respond to attempts of a new third force in news making to influence their coverage?

Modernization of Journalism and PR from a Comparative Perspective

What is striking about developments in political PR and political journalism is the superficial similarities that have been observed in so many countries. The underlying explanation has been described as a subtly differentiated “modernization process” (Mancini and Swanson 1996). The modernization concept holds that in each country innovations are constructed—or adapted from experiences elsewhere—in response to local developments and needs. Hence, similar forces have led political communication (i.e., the interplay of political PR and political reporting) to become more professionalized in postindustrial societies, but the precise forms and influences of professionalization are distinctive in each country (Mancini and Swanson 1996).

It is no secret that the United States is seen as the birthplace of many new campaign styles and reporting styles. In the 1997 British general election, the Labour Party copied many campaign techniques devised by the Clinton team in 1992. Tony Blair’s adviser Philip Gould worked together with James Carville and George Stephanopoulos in the Arkansas “war room” and later summarized his experiences in an article titled “Lessons from America” (Gould 1999: chap. 5). The Labour Party had sent over another delegation, which produced an internal

document titled "The American Presidential Election of 1992—What Can Labour Learn." Both became the blueprint for the 1997 Labour campaign (Gould 1999: chaps. 5, 9; Michie 1998: chap. 14). The British visitors 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" in which key campaign functions are included and the setting up of a rapid response and attack unit, a key seat task force, a twenty-four-hour media-monitoring unit, and an opposition research unit (Butler and Kavanagh 1997:56–58; Kavanagh 1997:29–30).

Next in line were the German Social Democrats (SPD). For them, the successful Blair campaign served as a role model (Esser et al. 2000). Thanks to the lessons learned from Great Britain—and from the United States—the SPD managed to shape a slick, modern campaign. For the first time in the history of all German parties, the SPD opened a state-of-the-art campaign headquarters with the same units mentioned above. 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 campaign (Esser et al. 2000). Of particular interest were the exchanges between Schroeder's campaign guru Bodo Hombach with Blair's special adviser Peter Mandelson. Both were labeled the "number one spin doctor" of their respective candidates. Both published programmatic books on their party's new "third way" policies—developing further Dick Morris's "triangulation" strategy of the successful 1996 Clinton reelection campaign (Bergmann and Wickert 1999; Esser 2000; Esser et al. 2000).

The institutional contexts of political consultancy and marketing practice in Great Britain and Germany differ in many ways from the situation in the United States (Plasser et al. 1999:90–91). U.S. campaigns 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 less cost-intensive, and are 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-centered 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).

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

considerably, the latest British and German elections have provided clear evidence that the degree of convergence is increasing (Esser et al. 2000; Plasser et al. 1999).⁴ The reason is simple: the majority of European political consultants regard political marketing practice in the United States as a role model—despite differences in the political and electoral systems. They stated in a recent survey that “if there is a European style of political marketing, then its core is a modification of the American model” (Plasser et al. 1999:96).

In the United States, these functions are fulfilled by professional political consultants whose job is to run “a specific campaign tailored for the individual candidate based on relevant political science, marketing, public relations, and advertising theory and research” (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1997:5). Whereas political consulting has become a fast-growing, profit-making industry in the United States (Friedenberg 1997; Thurber 2000), the political parties in Europe have prevented such development so far. Most existing campaign experts are either part of the party bureaucracy or are specialists in commercial PR and advertising, not political campaigning. However, the latest British and German general elections indicated a change. Two types of campaign strategists or spin doctors could be distinguished: those from a media background (Alastair Campbell and Charles Lewington in Great Britain and Hans-Hermann Tiedje and Detmar Karpinski in Germany) and those from a political party background (Peter Mandelson and Brian Wilson in Great Britain and Franz Muentefefering and Peter Hintze in Germany).

Process News

Given the central role of media coverage in political success in all modern information societies, reporters find themselves enmeshed in the action as campaign operatives and political PR strategists attempt to get them to deliver the campaign’s message “of the day.” This can result in adversarial process news, as journalists resent the feeling that they are being “used” to pass on what the “news massagers” have dreamed up. Blumler (1997) argued that “in a system dominated by savvy politicians and consultants, journalists feel in danger of losing their autonomous role” (p. 399). The result is a “journalistic fight-back” (Blumler 1997:399; Kerbel 1999:85) to protect their integrity and professional autonomy. Reporters would give their audience a very skeptical view of candidates and their campaign “handlers” (1) by pointing out that they would do whatever it takes to win our sympathies; (2) by presenting their information-control methods in a very negative, contemptuous light; and (3) by laying bare the manipulative mechanisms of a troubled system (Kerbel 1997:100). One particularly effective means of fighting back and reestablishing control over their own product is for journalists to portray the campaign operatives and political PR professionals in a particular sinister, demonic way.

A second type of process news is educational. Whereas adversarial process news is considered deeply cynical, educational process news is viewed as a rational and intelligible journalistic response in the political environment. Educational process news is to be welcomed as “the emergence of a demystificatory, potentially empowering commentary on the nature of the political process: an ongoing deconstruction of the relationship between journalism and the powerful which adds to, rather than detracts from, the stock of useful information available to the average citizen” (McNair 2000: 172–73). While adversarial process news is discussed as a threat to the democratic public sphere (Blumler 1997; Kerbel 1997, 1998, 1999), educational process news is welcomed as a new style of reporting that vitalizes the public sphere (D’Angelo 1999; McNair 2000). Both types describe the extreme ends of a scale with neutral-informative and postmodern-relativistic types in between.

The best example of the different shades of metadiscursive process news is the creation of the term *spin doctor*. 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, and propagandist, even a malign and evil force at the heart of the body politic. *Chamber’s 21st Century Dictionary* defines spin doctor as “someone, especially in politics, who tries to influence public opinion by putting a favorable bias on information presented to the public or to the media.”

Spin doctoring is an unscientific neologism coined by journalists to describe the complex process of intensifying political PR and political marketing. Spin doctoring is neither a neutral scientific concept (such as communication) nor the self-labeling of a branch (such as public relations); rather, it is a biased and negatively rated neologism of journalists to discredit the work of political 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 autonomous and powerful journalism that pursues an agenda of its own and whose mechanisms and motives are not always exclusively oriented toward the public welfare. It remains often concealed that (1) the media as a political institution pursue specific self-interests and (2) participants in political PR provide essential information without which the media could not possibly serve their public task. The second point underlines that political PR, in its role as a supporting infrastructure of mass-mediated politics, is a valuable element of the modern democratic process. This double perspective is missing in the journalistic use of the term spin doctoring. The demonization of spin is to be understood as an element of a journalistic counterstrategy: where political PR and marketing have developed a high degree of professionalism, journalism is developing counterstrategies to prove its independence and legitimacy. The demonization of legitimate political PR as dubious spin doctoring is the point when

educational process news tips into adversarial process news, as one elite group of long-established and respected professional communicators becomes defensive and paranoiac about the activities of a new force in news making (cf. McNair 2000: chap. 7).

Research Questions

These dynamics may explain why some journalists in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany expanded the meaning of the term widely and use it rather loosely. In many press reports analyzed for this study, the term spin doctor is not confined to some few top advisers anymore, but is increasingly used to represent almost any kind of campaign operative. Once the term spin doctor was established in the public discourse, British journalists especially used it indiscriminately to describe all sorts of PR officials and campaign members. For that reason, and because of the variety of German translations, we use here a broader understanding of spin doctor that includes all types of campaign operatives: (1) professional political consultants as they are now paramount in the United States, (2) media and PR experts who are hired for their media marketing knowledge but do not have a political background, and (3) experienced party politicians who have built up a special knowledge of campaigning.

As for their activities, we distinguish between media-related and non-media-related tasks. Campaign strategists carrying out media-related tasks can be defined as members of the campaign team who are in direct contact 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. Campaign strategists carrying out non-media-related activities fall into two subgroups: those responsible for improving the party's own campaign and those responsible for fighting the opposition campaign.

We will analyze the media coverage of spin doctors, campaign operatives, and behind-the-scenes activities of image construction and political marketing within three countries to examine the degree of metacoverage. Given the modernization of campaign styles in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, we are interested in the quantity of metadiscursive process news (research question 1), which we consider both a new style of election coverage and a direct response to the growing influence of campaign strategists and political PR experts. Apart from the amount, we are also interested in the media's evaluation of this new force of news making: how do the three countries' journalists portray and assess the spin doctors' activities? Do they resort to a more adversarial, educational, or neutral style of process news (research question 2)? The answer to this question will help us answer the bigger question of how the press in the three countries views its own role as a political institution. Given the changing

conditions of the modern political publicity process, what techniques do the news media employ in their coverage to come to terms with a new force in news making on the campaign stage—and what does this tell us about the news media's role (research question 3)?

Method

To compare the coverage of metadiscursive process news 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 (U.S.: May 5 to November 5, 1996; Great Britain: November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997; Germany: March 27 to September 27, 1998). In the United States, we chose the weekday and Sunday editions of the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. In Great Britain, we analyzed the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, and the *Observer*. Because Germany does not have a tradition of Sunday newspapers, we coded the four leading six-day national dailies (*Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*) and four weekly newspapers and magazines (*Welt am Sonntag*, *Focus*, *Spiegel*, and *Woche*). These German weeklies can be considered functional equivalents to the Sunday editions of the U.S. and British newspapers (Esser 1999). 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.

Television coverage was not available for any of the three countries. Previous research suggests, however, that the differences in metacommunication between television and newspapers are not substantial: Johnson et al.'s (1996) study of the 1992 U.S. election coverage found that differences in "tone" and "themes" of metacoverage were either "slight" or "not significant" (pp. 661, 666). Concentrating solely on the opinion-leading quality press does not, in our view, pose a serious limitation to this study because, in those newspapers, (1) we analyzed every relevant article employing an exhaustive sampling plan, (2) we were more interested in differences between countries than in differences between media, and (3) the opinion-leading quality press more or less mirrors and instigates the coverage of other media outlets such as tabloids and television. Concentrating solely on the press has the additional methodological advantage of structural and normative conditions' being much more equal in this area than in the area of television (where both Great Britain and Germany have a strong tradition of public service journalism untypical in the United States).

Each article was coded that mentioned terms such as spin doctor, communication consultants, campaign operatives, media strategists, and corresponding expressions (synonyms). All those persons were categorized as spin

doctors/campaign strategists who were described as such by using the actual keywords from our coding list or to whom were ascribed activities of spin doctoring/campaign consulting (see Tables 2-4). 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 U.S. and British newspaper articles from a full-text electronic database, Lexis-Nexis. The program 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.

Results

Amount of Coverage

There are huge differences in the amount of process coverage on spin doctors and campaign strategists in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. During the six months up to election day, the German papers published 169 articles in which campaign strategists and spin doctors (in the broad sense of term as outlined above) were mentioned. These articles contained 217 spin doctor references. The British papers carried 444 articles with 527 spin doctor references, and the U.S. papers carried 464 articles with 647 spin doctor references. Although the three countries' newspapers analyzed in this study are similar in character and size, the amount of metadiscursive process news varied enormously.

This is in line with previous research that shows that German journalists devote, in general, substantially less time and space to election news compared with their Anglo-American counterparts (Semetko 1996:63). This holds true for metacoverage as well: only 1.2 percent of the 1998 German election coverage referred to the role of the media in the campaign, whereas the respective U.S. share rose from 20 percent in 1992 to 25 percent in 1996 (Donsbach and Jandura 1999:152; Kerbel 1998:36; Kerbel et al. 2000). Our first research question about the amount of metadiscursive process news is easy to answer: this new reporting style is least developed in Germany and most common in the United States. The higher amount of process coverage in the United States is the result of a longer tradition of political consultants during which journalists have started to appreciate those consultants as interesting and reliable sources of information (Fallows 1997:147). It also reflects the fact that, in a U.S. general election, more campaign operatives and spin doctors are involved and play more important roles than in Great Britain and Germany. This is a result of the differing strength

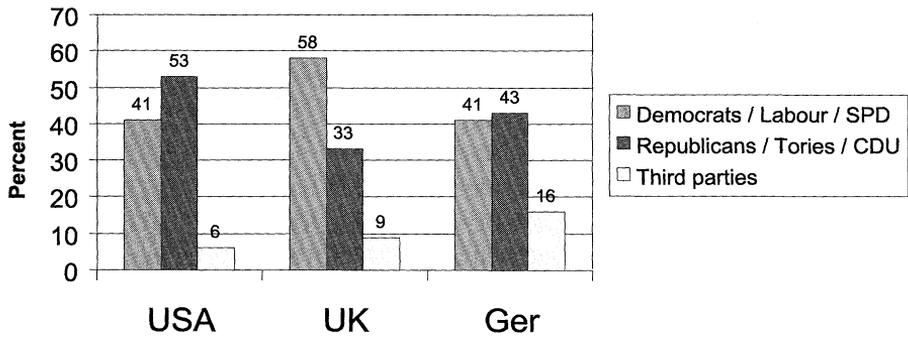


Figure 1

Party Affiliation of Spin Doctors

Note: Based on 647 references in the U.S. press, 527 in the British press, and 217 in the German press. Media sample includes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* (May 5 to November 5, 1996); the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times* (November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997); and *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Focus*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Woche* (April 27 to September 27, 1998). SPD = German Social Democrats; CDU = Christian Democratic Union.

of political parties in the three countries. In the United States, political consultants have taken over the role of party activists during the elections.

Interestingly, in Great Britain a similar process appears to be taking place. Blair relied on a small group of high-profile consultants during his campaign (Mandelson, Campbell, and Gould) who attracted much media attention. Consequently, the British papers' process 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 on. 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).

A different picture emerges in Germany: 43 percent of all spin doctor references in the German papers referred to the sluggish, old-world campaign of Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and 41 percent referred to the slick campaign of Schroeder's SPD.⁵ 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.

Interestingly, the U.S. picture resembles the German one, although the U.S. coverage was much more intense. Fifty-three percent of all spin doctor references referred to the Dole campaign, and only 41 percent referred 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. The larger number of articles on the Republican and CDU teams (as compared with the Democrat and SPD campaigns, respectively) reflects the fact that those teams delivered an imperfect campaign, which the press was happy to report on. It would indicate that crisis and negativism are still of higher news value than effective political marketing.

With regard to our research questions, it has to be concluded that German journalists are either less interested in the behind-the-scenes side of a modern election campaign or have not found it to be a topic on its own. It has to be said in fairness, however, that the SPD did deliver a smaller campaign that started later, employed fewer people, and cost less than the British Labour Party's campaign (Esser et al. 2000:233).⁶

Spin Doctors in Campaign Articles: Metacoverage or Normal Source?

There are two ways in which spin doctors and campaign strategists can become part of campaign coverage. First, they can be the object of meta-analysis. 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 or the media. Such articles are typical examples of metadiscursive process news. Second, spin doctors and campaign strategists can also be the source of campaign information. This is the case when they give statements and comment on candidates' actions, position on issues, campaign strategy, or criticisms of political opponents. Such articles rarely include analysis or reflection about their roles and goals; more often, they will include several word-by-word citations without the journalist commenting on them. This is not metacommunication.

This analytical distinction between source (= just a bland and basic piece of process information) and object (= metacommunication) allowed us to determine 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).

The results in Figure 2 clearly indicate that German and British journalists reported in a more detached fashion about spin doctors compared with their

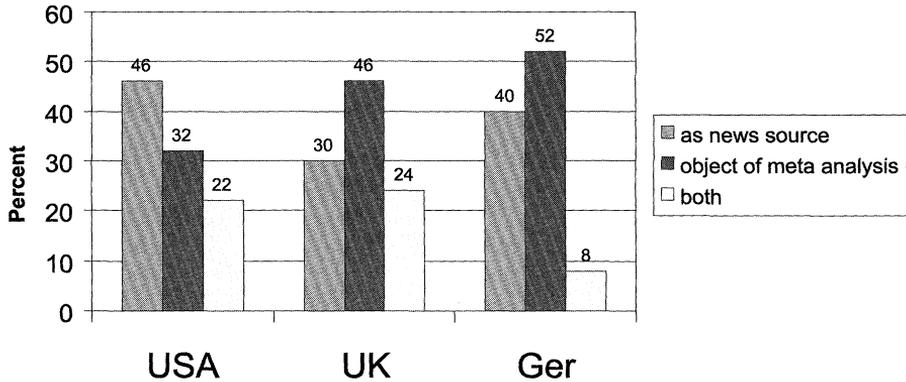


Figure 2

Spin Doctors—Metacoverage or Normal Source

Note: Based on 464 references in the U.S. press, 444 in the British press, and 169 in the German press. Media sample includes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* (May 5 to November 5, 1996); the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times* (November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997); and *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Focus*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Woche* (April 27 to September 27, 1998).

U.S. colleagues. The largest share of the German and British articles treated them as objects, whereas the largest share of the U.S. articles used them as sources. The high number of “sourced information” in the U.S. press reflects the journalistic norm to avoid anonymous sources, which is an important difference from British and German journalism. On the other hand, it appears also to be true that U.S. journalists are more readily prepared to accept spin doctors as a legitimate source of information and comment. This reflects again the longer tradition of spin doctoring and political consulting in the United States. The small 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-American press journalism.

The high British figure for “spin doctors as an object” reflects the persistence of Labour’s PR strategists to get their messages across: first, that the party’s programmatic profile has changed fundamentally, and, second, that it is determined to break the long-time conservative bias of the British press (Gould 1999). Its 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. The high U.S. figure for “spin doctors as a

source” reflects the fact that political consulting is a business there and consultants often wish to see their names in the news. In Great Britain and Germany, spin doctors are still subject to party discipline, which allows only very few of them to seek public attention.

With respect to research question 3, Figure 2 holds important information for our understanding of the relationship between the media as a political institution and political PR as a third force in news making. In Germany, and even more so in Great Britain, where campaign strategists and spin doctors are a new phenomenon, the media feel that it is necessary to distance themselves from this new group of information specialists. Given the competition among news makers, metadiscursive process news serves as a journalistic defense strategy that “erects crucial and commercially valuable ethical distance between two mutually dependent professional groups, in the interest of preserving journalistic legitimacy in the wider public sphere” (McNair 2000:137). In the United States, however, where spin doctors are no longer considered something new or dangerous, the media institution has come to terms with them on a day-to-day professional basis. They are thus being woven into the usual media coverage.

Activities of Spin Doctors

Research question 2 asks how the three countries’ journalists portray and assess spin doctors’ activities. What kinds of activities do journalists attribute to spin doctors (in a broad sense, including communication consultants and campaign strategists)? 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. However, by coding the news reports carefully, it was possible to distinguish clearly between three areas of responsibility: activities directly related to the media (see Table 2), activities aimed at fighting the campaign of the opposition (see Table 3), and activities aimed at improving the party’s own campaign (see Table 4).

In each article, it was possible to code up to four activities for each campaign team. The unit to be analyzed is not the article but rather the individual activities mentioned in an article. There were two possibilities by which a certain activity could be coded: it was explicitly attributed to a campaign operative by the reporter or it could be deduced from the article by the coder.

The U.S. newspapers covered more than 1,341 spin doctor activities, the British more than 874, and the German more than 355. It is to be noted that the U.S. and British newspapers paid much more attention to media-related activities than did German newspapers. Whereas in the United States 47 percent and in Great Britain 42 percent of all spin doctor activities covered referred to their

Table 2
Dealing with the media (in percentages)

Reported Activity	Articles		
	United States (n = 635)	Great Britain (n = 364)	Germany (n = 107)
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, or criticizing journalists	3	13	7
Preventing negative coverage through spin control (by criticizing, threatening, etc.)	0	11	2
Media monitoring	2	5	2
Media-related activities in general, unspecific	6	3	20

Note: Based on 1,341 reported spin doctor activities in the U.S. press, 874 in the British press, and 355 in the German press. Media sample includes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* (May 5 to November 5, 1996); the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times* (November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997); and *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Focus*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Woche* (April 27 to September 27, 1998).

Table 3
Fighting the opposition campaign (in percentages)

Reported Activity	Articles		
	United States (n = 236)	Great Britain (n = 121)	Germany (n = 51)
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 opposition campaign	7	2	10

Note: Based on 1,341 reported spin doctor activities in the U.S. press, 874 in the British press, and 355 in the German press. Media sample includes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* (May 5 to November 5, 1996); the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times* (November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997); and *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Focus*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Woche* (April 27 to September 27, 1998).

interaction with journalists, only 30 percent did so in Germany (107 out of 355). This is a further indication that metadiscursive process news does not yet play an important role in Germany in comparison with Anglo-American countries.

Table 4
Improving own campaign (in percentages)

Reported Activity	Articles		
	United States (n = 470)	Great Britain (n = 389)	Germany (n = 197)
Strategic consulting	38	22	64
Speeches, debate, and 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

Note: Based on 1,341 reported spin doctor activities in the U.S. press, 874 in the British press, and 355 in the German press. Media sample includes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* (May 5 to November 5, 1996); the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times* (November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997); and *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Focus*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Woche* (April 27 to September 27, 1998).

Metacoverage in Germany is still in a state of development. The German readers have not yet learned much about the people responsible for marketing, advertising, and opinion polling, as well as strategies, stage craftings, and spin control.

This applies especially to media-related activities (see Table 2). The German press did not tell its 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" hardly exists 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 United States, 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, for example, by threatening journalists." Referring to the two latter aspects, there were reports about the attempt of the Labour Party's electoral campaign headquarters to influence a BBC vote by calling repeatedly to have Blair made Man of the Year, and about the Labour and Tory headquarters' complaining to television news programs or newspaper editors about allegedly unbalanced or unfair news coverage (cf. Jones 1997).

Before polling day, the British Labour Party's campaign and communication director 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 process coverage by British journalists was at least partly induced by skepticism and disapproval toward the attempts of the spin doctors to exert influence.

In Great Britain, the large amount of critical process news about spin doctors is also true for activities aimed at "fighting the opposition campaign" (see Table 3). Exceptionally intensive was the selection of "rapid response" and "opposition research" as a central theme. This produced a much higher awareness in Great Britain in comparison with the United States and Germany. However, an important parallel appears when looking at "negative campaigning." In all three countries, this is an important task attributed to spin doctors (see Table 3).

The existing picture is also confirmed on observing the media coverage of activities aimed at improving spin doctors' own campaign (see Table 4). Again, the profile of the German campaign strategists was the least distinctive. The majority of all reported activities in Germany (126, or 64 percent) fall to the share of "strategic consulting." This result is attributed to the fact that the consultants of German parties are in many cases merely labeled 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. Minimalist commonplaces without any closer characterization predominated. The British and U.S. 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 of "opinion polling": it attracted much more attention in Great Britain and the United States, although the German SPD also did extensive opinion polling—but German journalists have not yet discovered it as a topic. What is remarkable in the British press is the high number of reports on the issue of "disciplining their own camp" as an important duty of the spin doctors (48 mentions, or 48 percent). 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 for this purpose that the order was given to "synchronize" every interview with the electoral campaign headquarters (see Franklin 1998; Jones 1997).

To conclude, British and U.S. journalists dealt much more intensively and distinctively with spin doctoring than their German colleagues. The least well informed readers on the duties of spin doctors and electoral campaign managers were to be found in Germany. Often, merely superficial commonplaces or

Table 5

Evaluation of spin doctors (in percentage)

Aspect Evaluated	Articles		
	United States (n = 464)	Great Britain (n = 444)	Germany (n = 169)
Consequences for political culture			
Positive	2		
Negative	4	18	2
Consequences for freedom of the press			
Positive	0.25	0.25	
Negative	0.5	6	0.5
Usefulness for campaign success			
Positive	6	5	3
Negative	3	6	8
Aspect Evaluated	Spin Doctor References		
	United States (n = 647)	Great Britain (n = 527)	Germany (n = 217)
Character of spin doctors			
Positive	1	5	2
Negative	3	10	10
Competence of spin doctors			
Positive	8	19	8
Negative	4	19	27

Note: Based on 647 references in the U.S. press, 527 in the British press, and 217 in the German press. Media sample includes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Washington Post* (May 5 to November 5, 1996); the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Independent on Sunday*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Times*, and the *Sunday Times* (November 1, 1996, to May 1, 1997); and *Welt*, *Welt am Sonntag*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Focus*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and *Woche* (April 27 to September 27, 1998).

blatant terms were used; differentiated information on the actual methods of political campaigners was an absolute exception. The U.S. coverage was primarily characterized by the literal quotation of spin doctors' statements. There, spin doctors were 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 detailed analysis of the evaluation of spin doctors. British journalists judged the activities, as well as the persons, much more negatively than did their U.S. and German colleagues (see Table 5). They regard them as a threat to the "freedom of

the press” and the “political culture.” The United States’ media drew a different picture: there, journalists judged the spin doctors as more “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 Kohl’s CDU (see Table 5). In answering research question 2, all three countries’ media institutions portrayed campaign strategists overwhelmingly negatively. Even if they tried to apply an educational framework of process news, they also used adversarial elements. We find the highest degree of adversarial process news in Great Britain, where journalists presented the information-control methods and the people responsible for them in the most negative—and partly sinister—light. The U.S. press was the most serene and pragmatic, but in the past a more critical or cynical approach predominated (Fallows 1997; Kerbel 1997, 1998, 1999). Germany showed the least distinct profile of metadiscursive process news but concurred with the other two media institutions on the overall evaluation that political PR experts and communication strategists are a problematic addition to the political publicity process.

The different frequency of metacoverage appears 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, which earned 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 on the part of Labour Party spin doctors. The “disciplining of their own camp” in the United States 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 of the party. Many of the measures mentioned in Germany are of less importance, mainly for two reasons. First, the German media culture is less cynical, less confrontational, and less aggressive. Journalists do not hold adversarial attitudes toward political institutions, and their interactions with political PR experts often follow party-political lines. For that reason, media-centered news management measures of the Anglo-American mold are less necessary in Germany (Pfetsch 1998, 2001). Second, the legendary “background circles”—confidential meetings of journalists who regularly invite politicians or their spokespersons—were again highly effective during the 1998 campaign and, therefore, made unnecessary some of the activities of spin doctors (Mueller 1999; Pfetsch 1998).⁷

Summary and Conclusions

Styles and frames of political coverage change over a period of time, and often these changes lead to alterations in the political publicity process. Since the

1990s, a new development in political journalism has emerged that can be labeled metacommunication. This study set out to develop a new theoretical concept (1) describing metacoverage as a new, third stage in election coverage after issue and strategy coverage; (2) linking metacoverage to a new approach that views the media as a political institution; and (3) conceiving metacoverage as the media's response to a new, third force in news making: professional political PR. Metacommunication is defined as the news media's self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism. While metacoverage can take two forms—self-referential news and process news—the present study puts the main emphasis on the latter. Process news focuses less on the performance and perceptions of the reporters themselves (as in self-referential news) and more on the strategies, stagecraftings, and spin doctors employed by candidates to control information. In terms of frequency, the much-criticized strategy frame is still the dominant reporting style and metacoverage a minority phenomenon: 25 percent of the U.S. coverage and only about 2 percent of the British and German election coverage was recently classified as process news in recent studies (Donsbach and Jandura 1999:152; Kerbel et al. 2000:17; McNair 2000:48). However, each of these studies used entirely different conceptual and operational definitions.

This study argues that one of the key characteristics of the emerging “third age of communication” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999) is politicians' increasing dependence on specialist political marketing and communication strategists who have assumed a new and influential role at the center of modern media-driven democracies. It is further argued that the news media—as a collective institution—react to this new force in news making with an increase in meta-discursive process news and to the media's own changing role as a powerful political actor with an increase in self-referential metacommunication. From a democratic-normative standpoint, both forms of metacommunication are to be welcomed as a new style of reporting that is potentially self-critical, self-analytical, contextualizing, and revealing about the hidden promotional powers in modern politics.

The findings of this study appear to support the view, however, that the news media—not the individual journalist—find difficulties in reporting about political PR professionals in a neutral and educational way. The term spin doctor is a good example. Spin doctor often means an unusually partisan and determined high-ranking expert in political PR who tries to influence public opinion by putting a favorable bias on information presented to the media. However, as long as political PR supplies reliable raw material of news making, there is nothing inherently “undemocratic” about the PR function itself. Although the media could not possibly serve its public task without essential information provided by PR officials, some media outlets tend to use the term spin doctor indiscriminately to demonize any kind of professional PR. 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 autonomous and powerful journalism that pursues an agenda of its own and whose mechanisms and motives are not always exclusively oriented toward the public welfare.

To investigate this problem more closely, the present study analyzed the media's depiction of a large and heterogeneous group of campaigns operatives, communication strategists, and political PR experts. Although educational process news is to be applauded as a desirable, topical, and appropriate style of reporting that could empower a "political public sphere in crisis," some process news stories take the form of an adversarial "journalistic fight back" that might rather promote public cynicism and political distrust (cf. Blumler 1997; Kerbel 1997). This is not to criticize the behavior of individual journalists or national groups of journalists but rather to draw attention to the fact the media—as a collective institution—are inherently limited in their capacity and accountability to carry out the same advanced functions as traditional political institutions (Patterson 1997).

The second conclusion of this study can be drawn from the different degrees of metacoverage. The level of metadiscursive process coverage depends first and foremost on the political marketing, strategic PR, and campaign management in the respective countries. In Germany, all three measures were applied to a lesser extent, and, as a consequence, the media covered them the least. The CDU led a very traditional, old-world campaign, and the SPD, although copying many elements of the Blair campaign, applied those elements only very moderately. This led to a completely different journalistic handling of this new form of political campaign PR. The moderate use of spin doctor activities in Germany is to be traced back to (1) a less antagonistic media culture, (2) a functioning system of interactions between political journalists and political spokespeople that follows political lines and personal trust, and (3) a functioning system of confidential "background circles" between reporters and politicians that serve as informal but useful opportunities for strategic news management (Pfetsch 1998, 2001). The German media system lacks a strong and aggressive press, which has to be seen as an autonomous power in the political process as is the case in Great Britain (Norris et al. 1999: chap. 2; Osborne 1999: chap. 7). As a consequence, in Great Britain "spin doctoring high gear" predominated; in Germany, it was "spin doctoring low gear" (Esser et al. 2000).

The U.S. media are regarded as even more antagonistic. U.S. journalism is characterized by an unleashed antipolitics bias and adversarial and arrogant attitudes toward political institutions (Patterson 1994). 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). The present study provided evidence that this

development has reached Great Britain as well: the journalists there reacted by far the most critically to the professionalization of political PR.

This underlines that metacoverage should be seen less as an educational exercise and more as a journalistic defense strategy. Where political PR and marketing practices have developed a high degree of professionalism, journalism is developing counterstrategies to prove its independence. In doing so, there appear to be different dynamic forces within the three media cultures. In Great Britain, the metacoverage was intensive because the phenomenon was new and aggressively employed. In the United States, the metacoverage was the most intensive because there the phenomenon has been known longest. However, U.S. journalists appear to have made peace with the spin doctors, since they quote them often on the record and judge them the most positively. In Germany, metacoverage and behind-the-scenes perspectives do not appear 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 political PR culture and the media culture.

Notes

1. Reporters involved in the Lewinsky story engaged in a spiral of self-coverage unseen before on television and in print. Kerbel (1999) argued,

It would not be exaggerating to say there were two distinct Lewinsky stories running simultaneously: The story about whether the president had an affair and tried to cover it up, and the self-referential story about how well the press was covering the story about whether the president had an affair and tried to cover it up. (p. 85)

2. Offering similar arguments, German scholars have proposed to view journalism and the mass media as an autonomous, self-willed social system (Weischenberg et al. 1998).
3. "Official" political actors and "traditional" political journalists have come under tremendous competition lately for media time and public attention by "new players of the media game." "Official" politicians—in times of shrinking political news holes, waning party loyalties, and growing journalistic skepticism—have to compete harder than ever before with social movements, single-issue pressure groups, entertainment figures, and other media celebrities for media access, public attention, and—last but not least—influence and control of popular perceptions of (political) events and issues. "Traditional" political journalists have come under pressure from a stronger market and infotainment orientation within their media organization and have to compete harder than ever before with entertainment, sports, and financial journalism for resources, space, and appeal. This has led to reductions in several fields of political coverage, to an increase in tabloidization and infotainment, and a decrease in ethical standards as a new generation of political reporters takes over. At the same time, the "classic" concept of the mass audience is being replaced by a fragmented, "balkanized" array of subaudiences such as "specialists," "eclectists," and "anti-politicals." Polling and focus groups have become more important than ever before in keeping in touch with a fickle "public mood" (Blumler and Gurevitch 2000; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999).

4. Research into comparative political communication has identified six relevant context factors that determine political marketing practice and news management in a given country (Pfetsch 1998; Plasser et al. 1999; Scammell 1998):
 - The electoral system (candidate vs. party elections, majority vote system vs. proportional representation, density of the election cycle)
 - The system of party competition (number of parties and party activists, parties' ability to mobilize followers, strength of ties in society)
 - The legal regulations of election campaigns (public vs. private campaign financing, budget limits, access to television advertising, time limits for official campaigns, candidate nominations, primaries)
 - The media system (public vs. dual vs. private television systems, differentiation of the media system, professional roles of journalists, autonomy of mass media)
 - The national political culture (homogeneous vs. fragmented culture, hierarchical vs. competitive political cultures, degree of trust in the political process, political involvement)
 - The degree of modernization in society (degree of societal differentiation, industrialized vs. information society, socioeconomic mobility)

Currently, most European campaign teams confine themselves to importing and implementing certain techniques and isolated organizational innovations without adopting the full U.S. model. A recent survey revealed, however, that many British and German political consultants have assimilated the central strategic parameters of U.S. campaign logic into their professional self-definition (Plasser et al. 1999).

5. The relatively high number of third-party strategists and spin doctors (16 percent) can be explained by the German multiparty system and the necessity of forming coalitions.
6. Blair as the undisputed leader had systematically modernized both the party and the campaigning and established his allies in key positions. Schroeder, on the contrary, was at first disputed within his party. He was nominated chancellor candidate only six months before election day and was not at any time involved in the planning of the Kampa. Neither Schroeder's personal consultants Hombach and Uwe-Carsten Heye nor Schroeder himself trusted the Kampa particularly (Knaup et al. 1999:117–18).
7. As German election specialist Mueller (1999) wrote,

Spin doctoring, as it applies to Great Britain, that is a system of rewards and punishments, the permanent phoning of journalists, was not used to the same extent in Bonn during the crucial period of campaigning [1998]. According to several Bonn correspondents, permanent attempts to influence the media from the party headquarters do not exist. There are informal talks and there are numerous journalistic circles which meet on a regular basis and invite politicians to their meetings. But the idea of constantly holding journalists under scrutiny and criticizing their work, a notion that is held in some reports on spin doctoring, does not exist. By all means, the attempts to influence the media are very much more differentiated. (p. 52)

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