

PR - Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy



BY IAIN MACKINNON

Edinburgh: In the UK recently we heard something we don't hear very often - a politician admitted that he'd been wrong!

One of the founders of 'New Labour' told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that in their first term of office Tony Blair's government had focussed too much on using public relations to win support for their plans.¹

Former Trade and Industry Minister, Peter Mandelson, told the BBC that after their election win in 1997 the Labour government were busy trying to manage the media to get their message across when they should instead have been concentrating on drawing up policies to bring real public benefits.

The problem for Labour now is that having been so close to the PR industry in

the past, Mr Mandelson's comments leave the public and the media wondering if his statements can really be trusted, or whether he is still secretly spinning in an effort to win back support.²

These doubts have arisen because PR can be a very cynical profession and its practitioners use all kinds of tricks to get their message across.

One of PR's founding fathers was Edward Bernays, a nephew of the psychologist Sigmund Freud who incorporated some of his uncle's theory into his work. Bernays felt that major decisions at a national level should be left to "the intelligent few" and believed PR could ensure "the engineering of consent" so that the public would come on board with the "intelligent few's" plans.³

Some of Bernays' own early efforts were spectacular. On the 1929 Easter Parade down Fifth Avenue in New York he arranged for some glamorous young high society women to light cigarettes and dubbed them 'Torches of Freedom', linking the right for women to smoke in public with the wider issue of women's rights which

was to the fore at the time.

Bernays arranged for the women to speak to the major press agencies and saw to it that photographers were present. The result was that the following day the story was on the front pages of newspapers all over the US, sparking a public debate on whether women should be allowed to smoke as freely as men.

What the public didn't know was that Bernays was being employed at the time by the American Tobacco Company to promote their products and expand their markets.⁴

Since then, PR has become a firmly established and slightly more subtle element in modern business and politics with the aquaculture industry on the long list of clients now making use of its special kind of trickiness.

Take, for example, the Johnson Brothers' organically farmed cod from the Shetland Islands of northern Scotland. According to the local newspaper "the relentlessly positive coverage" the fish have received in the media has been "cleverly engineered by a team of top PR consultants". At the helm of

However, the example of BSE (and the emerging avian flu crisis in which, despite vigorous denials by multinational poultry companies, industrial farming is now also being implicated[1]) shows that for all their tricks the PR industry cannot make contaminants and illnesses disappear. The contaminants are still there. Key players in the industry and the government are aware that they are there and they know that they are a risk to public health.

meet with UFC employees who fed them scare stories about the advance of Marxism in the country. Those journalists' copy helped mould public opinion against the democratically elected Guatemalan government and paved the way for a CIA backed military coup – Shetland Islands Council beware if it ever decides to take a stand against Johnson Brothers!⁶

In Ms Tritton's view the Scottish press came onside immediately to the organic cod venture "taking on Johnson's as one of their own".⁷ To that end the fact that Johnson Brothers is now run by a City of London investment firm (with a London based PR team) is an inconvenient truth not talked about in Johnson's "relentless" PR campaign.⁸

Ms Tritton's approach might be slightly cynical. However, if Johnson Brothers has a product that is truly as good as they believe their cod is, then why not use whatever means necessary to win over the public to it – all's fair in love, war and market economics.

Problems begin when a product's brand image and reality part company.

In the 1990s the marketing image of British beef took a terrible hammering when, after mad cow disease was discovered, it was revealed that beef farmers had, quite legally, been feeding ground up cattle, sheep and chickens to their animals.

Scientists now believe it was through this infected feed that Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) was transmitted.⁹

In this situation the beef industry faced ruin. So what was the correct response to BSE?

One response would be for the farmers and the food industry to admit to the public they had a major problem on their hands and begin work on ways to resolve it as quickly and effectively as possible.

But what if the tricks of the PR industry

could have allowed the beef industry to continue with 'business as usual'? What if they knew of ways to manipulate the evidence to claim that the scientists were wrong; that there was no danger to human health; and that current farming practices were legal and safe?

Remarkable as it might seem, a Scottish academic is claiming the aquaculture industry followed this latter path in the way it dealt with recent allegations of high levels of chemical pollutants in salmon.

David Miller is Professor of Sociology at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. One of his primary research areas is looking at how the media can be manipulated by highly skilled PR experts who distort information to ensure that false messages reach the public.

He is also the head of the department I was studying in last year. When I heard last year that he was researching the aquaculture industry I was surprised, and I was even more surprised when I read the results of his work.

He claims that in the wake of the controversial Pew Report in 2004 a coordinated and sustained campaign of misinformation was conducted on behalf of the industry by PR experts, who were backed up by elements of the government and the scientific community.

The scientists behind the Pew Report claimed to have found evidence of dangerously high levels of pollutants in farmed salmon, and Scottish and Faroese farmed salmon in particular.

The research was published in the research journal 'Science' and the major media in the UK picked up the story. However, within a week of the industry beginning a PR campaign the same media outlets were running articles dismissing the work as "pseudo-science" and as "flawed and biased".

the team is Leanne Tritton of ING Media.

When she spoke at a fish farming conference in Shetland last October the local 'Shetland Times' newspaper reported her strategy. She said that her PR team had targeted "big shot journalists" who were flown up to Shetland and given special tours of the Johnson Brothers premises. The PR team then used the favourable copy the "big shot journalists" wrote to target other more doubting writers in what Ms Tritton described as the "incestuous world" of journalism.⁵

This special targeting of influential journalists has been a favourite ploy of the PR industry since Edward Bernays' time. While working for the US owned United Fruit Company in the 1950s Bernays arranged specially organised trips to Guatemala for important US journalists. At that time the UFC was one of the biggest landowners in Guatemala and was concerned that a new socialist government in the country had plans to take some of its unused holdings and hand them over to landless peasants.

Bernays arranged for the journalists to

Take, for example, the Johnson Brothers' organically farmed cod from the Shetland Islands of northern Scotland. According to the local newspaper "the relentlessly positive coverage" the fish have received in the media has been "cleverly engineered by a team of top PR consultants". At the helm of the team is Leanne Tritton of ING Media.

On the contrary, says Professor Miller. He claims his analysis shows that the Pew Report's science was scrupulous and accurate. Miller says that what was "flawed and biased" was the PR campaign's response to the report which used "misinformation, manipulation and subterfuge" to deny that a health risk exists.

He says that supporters of the industry repeatedly misrepresented the Pew team's findings. One defence put forward by the industry was that none of the individual contaminants (including PCBs, toxaphene, dieldrin and dioxins) found in the salmon were above legal limits.

However, Miller says this argument is irrelevant because the Pew team had already acknowledged this fact. He writes: "The authors stated clearly that 'Individual contaminant concentrations in farmed and wild salmon do not exceed U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) action or tolerance levels for PCBs and dieldrin.

"However, FDA action and tolerance levels are not strictly health-based, do not address the health risks of concurrent exposure to more than one contaminant, and do not provide guidance for acceptable levels of toxaphene and dioxins in fish tissue."

"To be clear about this: one reason the authors used the EPA [US Environment Protection Agency] guidelines were that they were developed to understand multiple contaminant intake rather than intake of a single contaminant."

It was this 'cocktail effect' that prompted the Pew team to conclude: "The combined concentrations of PCBs, toxaphene, and dieldrin trigger stringent consumption advice for farmed salmon purchased from wholesalers and for store-bought farmed fillets. This advice is much more restrictive than consumption advice triggered by con-

taminants in the tissues of wild salmon."

The Pew team's recommendation that consumption of the most toxic Scottish salmon should not exceed more than one half-portion per month prompted immediate action from the aquaculture industry's lobbying body Scottish Quality Salmon.

With the support of the Scottish Executive, the Food Standards Agency and independent scientists they rubbish the science on which the report was based and suggested that it had been funded as part of an environmental campaign against salmon farming.

SQS's defence of the industry had support from top levels of government. The chairman of the Food Standards Agency, Sir John Krebs, wrote a letter to the Guardian in which he said that the Pew study based its risk assessment on "out of date science from 1991".

Yet Professor Miller claims that the Pew scientists' risk assessment data was actually more up-to-date than the FSA's own work. He also claims that the FSA chairman appears to have misinterpreted at a very basic level how the Pew scientists went about their analysis. Sir John defended the industry by noting a World Health Organisation briefing which said that "so long as dioxins were kept below thresholds, there would be no adverse effect upon health".

However, the Pew team had specifically decided to exclude dioxins from their consumption advice. Miller notes that the key reason for this was "because of the international disagreement around dioxin risk assessment". He added: "In particular, there is a disagreement on risk assessment between the EPA and other bodies such as the FDA and WHO."

As a result, says Miller, Sir John Krebs' defence of farmed salmon was "entirely irr-

relevant".

The FSA were not the only prominent supporters of the industry. Miller meticulously details links showing that the American scientists who defended farmed salmon and were portrayed as 'independent experts' were in fact either paid for by the industry or had a long history of pro-business and anti-environmental advocacy work.

The same was true in Scotland, he contends.

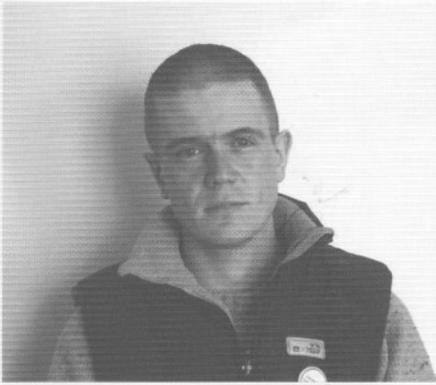
One week after the original contamination story 'The Scotsman' published an article in which Gordon Bell and Douglas Tocher, two scientists from the Stirling based Institute of Aquaculture, claimed they had conducted "an entirely independent study" looking at PCB and dioxin levels in farmed fish.

On the basis of that study Tocher and Bell felt that the Pew Report was "misrepresentative and grossly unfair of a product which is both nutritious and healthy".

According to Miller the two scientists had not been acting "independently" at all but had been paid by various industry bodies, including EWOS, Biomar and Marine Harvest, to carry out the study as part of a project looking at the possibility of replacing fish oil with vegetable oils in fish feed.

In addition to this financial dependency on the industry the Institute of Aquaculture are now also a part of the industry as they have become joint owners of a cod farm in Argyll along with a sister company of EWOS, the Norwegian government owned feed company.

Miller claims: "The scientists at the Institute of Aquaculture stand exposed as at best facing a serious conflict of interest, and at worst acting as spin doctors for the industry in which they have a financial stake."¹⁰



He presents a compelling case that the Pew Report was accurate in its assessment of organic pollutants in farmed salmon. If he is right, that means the industry has to face the fact that unsafe levels of harmful chemicals are present in farmed salmon and that it must choose between market and moral values.

Does the industry own up to the fact that the Pew scientists had it right and focus, as a matter of urgency, on developing cleaning technology for the feedstuffs that are believed to be the source of the problem?

Or does it continue with business as usual, hoping that the high level of contaminants in its produce does not come back to haunt it in the future? RECENT STUDIES ALSO CLAIM THAT THE BENEFITS OF EATING SEAFOOD OUTWEIGH ITS RISKS – BUT THESE TOO SEEM TO FOCUS ON SINGLE CONTAMINANTS RATHER THAN THE EFFECTS OF MULTIPLE CONTAMINANTS.

Will aquaculture be able to learn from the BSE crisis? It was 2000 when the Phillips Report into BSE was finally published. At the time the Labour politician Roy Hattersley wrote:

“Lord Phillips conceded that two ministers of agriculture (John Gummer and Douglas Hogg) and Stephen Dorrell (when he was secretary of state for health) underplayed the risk of eating infected meat. ‘The public,’ the report says, ‘was repeatedly assured that it was safe to eat beef.’ Eighty families now know that not to be true. But at least it can be said in the government’s defence that, for a time, it actually believed its own propaganda. Then ministers realised that transmission to humans was possible. But ‘believing that the risks ... were remote’, it played them down because it was ‘preoccupied with pre-

venting an alarmist over-reaction.’

“Lord Phillips concludes that ‘the campaign of reassurance was a mistake’.

“Amen to that. But it is less easy to endorse his judgment that ‘the government did not lie’. It was certainly - to use the latest phrase to be added to the establishment lexicon - ‘economical with the truth’. Lord Phillips observes, with magnificent judicial restraint, that, when the risk of death and infection was confirmed, ‘the possibility of a risk to humans was not communicated to the general public or to those whose job it was to enforce precautionary measures’. That sounds to me like the intention to deceive - the best definition of a lie which is available to us.”¹¹

The wider implication of Miller’s study is that the PR industry is able to support unsustainable and unsafe industrial practices by using government and elements of the scientific community to convince the media and the public of something that is simply not true.

This being the case, it means that the aquaculture industry does not have to worry about practices that are damaging to human health or to the environment - they can always rely on the PR industry to be there to tidy up the mess and convince the public that nothing has happened.

In this scenario, as long as independently minded scientists can be attacked and marginalised by industry paid experts who have, through the “engineering” of the PR machine, much greater access to the media it will be possible for legitimate concerns to be undermined or ignored.

However, the example of BSE (and the emerging avian flu crisis in which, despite vigorous denials by multinational poultry companies, industrial farming is now also being implicated¹²) shows that for all their tricks the PR industry cannot make contaminants and illnesses disappear. The contaminants are still there. Key players in the industry and the government are aware that they are there and they know that they are a risk to public health.

Caught in the net of a system of values where “the intention to deceive” is prevalent, the leaders of the aquaculture industry may need to weigh up the values of the market and those of their wider lives, and ask: “What kind of world do I want my children to grow up in?”

David Miller’s analysis of spin and the fish farm industry is available in ‘Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy’, a collection of essays published in June this year which examines the role of the PR industry in promoting the aims of industry and how these can be in conflict with the wider public interest.

- 1 ‘Brown to be PM in weeks - Blair’; BBC Website; available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6610623.stm; accessed 140507
- 2 ‘Is Blair right to bring back Mandelson’; BBC Website; available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/471585.stm; accessed 140507
- 3 ‘Mandelson appointment: your reaction’; BBC Website; available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/3559968.stm; accessed 140507
- 4 ‘PR. A Social History of Spin’; Stuart Ewen; Basic Books; 1996.
- 5 Videoclip of Bernays talking about ‘Torches of Freedom’ available at http://www.prmuseum.com/bernays/bernays_video_torches_QT.html Accessed 140507
- 6 ‘Organic cod message spreads net far and wide thanks to PR’; The Shetland Times; Friday 6th October 2006.
- 7 Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala; Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer; Doubleday; 1982.
- 8 ‘Organic cod message spreads net far and wide thanks to PR’; The Shetland Times; Friday 6th October 2006.
- 9 Information available at <http://www.milestone-capital.com/portfolio.cfm>
- 10 ‘Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy’; World Health Organisation Fact Sheet; available at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs113/en/> Accessed 120607.
- 11 ‘Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy’; edited by David Miller and Will Dinan; Pluto Books; 2007.
- 12 ‘The diseased herd’; Roy Hattersley; The Guardian; October 28th 2000; available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,389084,00.html> Accessed 120607
- 13 ‘Bird flu crisis - small farms are the solution not the problem’; Grain briefing; July 2006; available at http://grain.org/seedling_files/seed-06-07-11.pdf Accessed 130607