

Louw, P. E. (2010). *The media and political process (2nd ed.)* London: Sage.

Reviewed by [Richard Phillipps](#), Bond University

Here is a text that I definitely did not enjoy, even though I could see the point of the arguments being made and the distasteful practices highlighted. Idealists among the undergraduates taking Eric Louw's class in Political Communication at the University of Queensland must be shocked to the core by the book, which reduces political media workers to commentators, constructors and observers abetting a second-hand interpretation of a Machiavellian smoke-and-mirrors show.

The worst aspects of political public relations are exposed as nasty spin-doctors "servicing the needs of the mass democratic machine" in an institutionalised game of political deceit. In 11 chapters well suited to cover most of the topics in each lecture of a semester, Louw exposes how hype and image-making have grown to be essential features of the political process in Western democracies. He calls this "televisualised politics", with politicians, journalists and public relations people dependent on each other, all trying to use each other. The audience sees a view of the workings of media in democracies, which is usually entertaining but subjective, constructed and not necessarily accurate or enlightening.

Public relations comes out of the book's explanations in a very bad light and is usually referred to as "spin-doctoring", the practitioners manipulating what political actors are saying and doing, to recast them in the best possible light, driven by the variations in opinion poll results. Everything to Louw's mind is rehearsed, reinterpreted, even slips and leaks, doorstep interviews and conferences, the interpretations to restate journalists' questions, the key messages to be driven home in short sound-bites.

Public relations workers these days must be media experts, supplying everything needed for journalists to construct a good story. Thorough background research is vital, especially information that can deflect negative publicity and provide exciting and interesting stories that will be used, ones that will help bury any bad news.

Some of the worst examples of political public relations, cover-ups and lying are recorded, also the claim that smear campaigns against opponents are a routine part of the work these days. Juicy information can be slipped into the Internet where titbits will be picked up and often used by media desperate for stories at crucial times during a political campaign - maybe when it is too close to an election to fully refute any untruths.

An early chapter deals with the history of political public relations and the evolution of the liberal democratic system in Europe, North America and other regions. Most countries today use a professional media relations army supporting elected officials, providing entertaining stories, sensation, hype and titillation, all there just to manipulate public opinion.

The rise of the Internet as a prime interpreter of political action is explored but, as Louw explains, much content there is author-centric - amateurish and self-indulgent. Some content is put there by the spin-doctors and political marketeers. There is also a sprinkling of dissident material - some of it author-centric, some black propaganda (i.e. untrue). Louw contends that today's "spin industry has become essential for trying to 'steer' the masses" and a "precondition for making liberal democracy function" (p. 45).

Louw investigates the complicit media role in making liberal democracies "public relations-ized". He claims the media organisations have degenerated from a fourth estate role to "sensationalized watchdogism" and, in some cases, to a lapdog style where journalists cooperate with politicians to make the political system operate more efficiently.

For editors and producers interested more in building circulation and ratings than in highlighting dull policy choices and differences between parties, there is today a growing spectacle journalism not too concerned with truth, eager to spew out any plausible inside story from leaks.

Louw has given attention to the new century's growing obsession with the Internet, Facebook and YouTube included. He has included in Chapter 9 a discussion of how terrorism interacts with and plays to the media - how terrorists devise spectacular acts of violence to spread fear campaigns to different audiences, also how counter-terrorist agencies co-opt the media as well.

Chapter 10 looks at the complex effect of the media on foreign relations policy making, which is usually more effective in achieving results outside the glare of the media spotlight. Negotiators find it difficult to make concessions while their constituencies are watching.

In the final 10 pages - Chapter 11, Conclusion - Louw reflects on the book's themes and asks readers to consider the successes and failures of media-ized politics. Many journalists will reject the notion that they are implicated in hype politics and are manipulated by public relations. PR people too will consider the examples from the dark side of their profession far from typical and not practised widely because when uncovered they are self-defeating.

The text includes a useful 12-page glossary which expounds on the more difficult terms used - everything from Agenda-setting to Teleology and the Westminster parliamentary system is explained in some detail.

I question whether this second edition has ranged widely enough in exploring new material on the media and politics. Some sources I thought would have been included and commented on are not - although the list of references is extensive, it includes only eight reports from 2007 or 2008.

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