

The new spin:
Effects of information control behaviours on
source trustworthiness and persuasion

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

Given the high level of skepticism from the public toward politicians, this research explores the communication styles that separate public figures who are trusted and supported from those who are not. Contrary to conventional practice, it is argued that the use of ‘spin’ in political communication is a large factor contributing to the public’s negative perception of politicians. Political spin is defined as a communication style encompassing specific behaviours designed to appeal to the media, control information, and contain the meaning audiences derive from a message. This research operationalised spin as it is used in political communication and compared participants’ responses to messages with low and high levels of spin. The present research comprised three studies. In Study One, interviews were conducted with communication professionals to define the concept and specific ‘information control behaviours’ associated with spin. An ‘authenticity’ scale was then developed to measure audience responses to low and high-spin messages. In Study Two, 50 participants were randomly assigned to view a series of low or high-spin political messages. Participants rated messages from a confederate politician as well as actual politicians, government officials, and corporate representatives using the Authenticity Scale. Study Three was conducted throughout the 5-weeks of political campaigning prior to a general election. A representative sample of 60 voters was used each week in a repeated measures design to rate the political candidates and two confederate politicians using the Authenticity Scale. It was found that participants were able to clearly discern the degree of spin used by politicians when communicating a message. Messages containing a high level of spin elicited more negative attitudes and significantly lower levels of support for politicians, than messages containing a low level of spin. Specifically, participants’ perceptions of source trustworthiness and credibility were significantly higher for politicians using a low-spin style of communication. The findings are discussed in terms of the expectancy

disconfirmation theory. The findings suggest that adopting a new low-spin style of communication will assist public figures to communicate more persuasively and to better engage an increasingly skeptical public.

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