

Doctoring the spin

By [Ramotena Mabote](#)

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Caught subtly in the unfolding and messy so-called Ngcuka-Zuma fight, is the profession of spin doctoring. It's the season of scoundrels and social rejects, isn't it? There seems to be a race for taking insults. Take your pick. You have a choice. You can be a plagiarist, a corrupt politician, a former apartheid spy, an unscrupulous editor, an arms dealer or even a fisher of men.

Forget about Darrel Bristow-Bovey and Cynthia Vongai - they who forgot to acknowledge the sources of their writings. For a second you can turn a blind eye on whether the accusations by alleged former apartheid spy, National Director of Public Prosecutions Bulelani Ngcuka, about alleged corrupt Deputy President Jacob Zuma are true or not. In fact, forget that these allegations and counter allegations may or may not be churned out by editor(s) whose integrity is being questioned.

Listening to radio talk shows and scanning through opinion articles and editorials, there is a new kid on the firing line. The commentators in the current spat between Zuma and Ngcuka have subtly made snide reference to the necessity and sometimes the appropriateness of the behind-the-scenes off-the-record media briefings. At the altar here is the age-old craft or profession of media management.

In the business of news there are three protagonists - the source, the writer (researcher/reporter) and the audience. Without the source, the writer has no copy to produce material for the reader. Therefore, sources of news are very critical in the process of news production.

Chances are that retired judge Joos Hefer, tasked with the job of uncovering agents and double agents of the 80s, will have a tough day finding out the truth about who we should trust and who we should view with suspicion. This will be made more so difficult by the fact that the sources of these allegations will remain unnamed - for good and bad reasons. But I am not interested in the Hefer commission.

I read recently that in his time as president of the United States, Ronald Reagan's theory of media management was "it doesn't matter what you say as long as you say it first". What is printed about an issue first is what the public remembers. Everything from there is catch-up and defence. The Reagan Administration used this tactic masterfully. It became known as "disinformation".

In the last few weeks or months, South Africa has witnessed its own soap opera of disinformation in the Ngcuka-Zuma-Shaik-Maharaj-Munusamy et al saga. Behind closed doors, in dark alleys, bars and even outside the borders of this country, informants (spin doctors) posing as sources of news have cajoled journalists - white and black, junior and senior, male or otherwise.

The sole aim of the spin was to get their side of the story out first. This is common practice. In my day as a journalist, I attended enough off-the-record briefings by all sorts of sources including politicians, government communicators, suspected criminals and even priests contesting positions in the church. And I am sure this is the case with anyone who is a journalist. And even today, on the other side of the fence, I have arranged and will continue to arrange confidential briefings between the media and my clients.

For people to now turn around and pretend it was wrong for Ngcuka to have a briefing with black editors is like wagging the dog. I find it absolutely normal and acceptable to lobby journalists. And there certainly is nothing wrong with clustering them in terms of ethnicity, gender or even financial standing, if you can determine that. I bet you some of the white editors who have complained have had privileged briefings with key informants to the exclusion of black editors, and nobody raised a storm.

However, there is a lesson for spin doctors to learn from the debacle. I think that lobbying people for the sake of lobbying as classically understood to mean to win support, is no longer the way things should be done. Even worse, lobbying media in order to vilify or cast aspersions about your adversaries is a poor strategy. It does not make you look good.

Lobbyists and spin doctors in South Africa must redefine their role. They must realise that by virtue of their position, supposed knowledge and expertise, they serve masters that completely depend on them for profiling. I am not sure that our lobbyists want to be remembered or identified as masters of smear (wagging the dog) or killers of characters. It adds no feather in one's cap to deal with crises by making the next guy look bad. It is even worse when we have spin doctors whose main preoccupation is to question credentials and qualifications of adversaries, only because they have no better defence.

I would rather that we have a new type of lobbyist in this country. One who seeks to create a better profile of their master and his or her organisation or company. One who sets out to become the caregiver to the leader - to make sure that he looks good in public, he understands public speaking, he maintains his integrity even in bad times, is honest, is taken seriously by peers and foe, and most importantly he achieves his business results at all times.

This lobbyist should be a mister-know-all. He must know the law and understand economics. He must understand dress as he appreciates language. He must build bridges and fan fires for his boss. He must create liaisons that seem impossible to achieve. He must be the walking and talking provider of solutions.

The problem is, for now, we are stuck with spin doctors that are interested in wagging the dog thinking that it is the best way to serve the master.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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