



## “Weapons of Mass Delusion”<sup>1</sup>

- **Politics and the media, stories, values and commitments**

### Ideas for leading a Conversation

*For general guidance in running these sessions see  
'Planning a Conversation' also available at [www.agoraspace.org](http://www.agoraspace.org)*

#### Background

Stories are a principal means by which we make sense of life. Each of us gives an account of our lives by constructing a story. Through this we give reason for our actions. The person who can no longer make sense of the world in terms of a personal story may be in the deepest sense 'lost'. Daniel Taylor says,

*'Our greatest desire, greater even than the desire for happiness is that our lives mean something. This desire for meaning is the originating impulse of story.'*

What is true for the individual is also true of our corporate life. If a politician wants to take us to war they tell us a story saying effectively. 'This is how I make sense of what is happening, enter my world and approve my action.' Politics has been described as 'the art of selling stories'. It may be that how a society works with the stories that make up its life is a crucial determinant of its health. This conversation will work with that idea, looking particularly at the recent war in Iraq and how we make good political decisions.

#### Starter questions for small group discussion

1. **Why did we go to war with Iraq?**
2. **Describe a time when a situation you knew about was reported in the press. What happened and how did you feel about it?**
3. **Have you ever noticed yourself telling your own story to someone with an obvious spin? Why did you do this?**

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<sup>1</sup> These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at [www.agoraspace.org](http://www.agoraspace.org) or email [enquiries@agoraspace.org](mailto:enquiries@agoraspace.org)

## One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this. The resource section offers several other approaches.

### **Begin the evening with Question One. Why did we go to war with Iraq?**

After they have discussed it invite each group to express their ideas briefly to everyone e.g. by asking for them to imagine themselves writing a headline that summarises their discussion. This will create a list such as

Revenge for 9/11

Finishing what George Bush senior started

Weapons of mass destruction

Removing a tyrant

Tony Blair in the power of George W

Tony Blair likes international stage

The strategic role of oil

Then suggest that to answer this question is essentially to try to tell the story. That is to draw together all that we know about this, all that we have heard and feel, and so construct a story whose principle aim is to **make sense** of what has happened.

Then tease out what such stories are composed of and how we work to discern truth.

Firstly one can notice that there are aspects that can be questioned by the use of **logic** and appeal to **evidence**.

So for example the majority of people in the US, even now, will say that there is an important link between Al Qaida and Iraq.

George Bush said this to a naval academy a few weeks before the war started,

*'They brought the war to us and we are taking it back to them.'*

Many in this country would not go along with that and would question it saying there is no good **evidence** of such a link.

More importantly we were 'sold' the war largely by appeal to the threat presented by Saddam Hussein's purported 'weapons of mass destruction'. Yet since the war no one has claimed to find any significant evidence that he had any.

Evidence is clearly important. Yet even that does not settle the matter, because people are involved in this and stories necessarily involve an attempt to make sense of human behaviour.

For example the reality of the threat posed by Saddam depends not only on having weapons, but also on forming a judgement as to what he might use them for. **A story has to imaginatively enter the minds of others** and describe the motivations of a Bush, Blair or Hussein (point to where people did this in their discussion). This is obviously a very uncertain process, and a process laden with all sorts of judgements about the people and the situation. How we tell the story says a great deal about us and our beliefs, values and commitments as well as those we comment on. This

applies both to us as individuals and to the various intermediaries who relay the stories to us.

**Go to Question Two. Describe a time when a situation you knew about was reported in the press. What happened and how did you feel about it?**

It is likely that most people will have been uncomfortable with the way that the thing they knew about was reported. Ask for thoughts about why this happens. It will reveal the considerable diversity of presentation possible even in the simplest issue, including which 'facts' are reported and how they are interpreted, the different perceptions as to what is really important etc.

Lead on to a discussion about the growing power of the media in our lives. This may stimulate interest.

*Harold Wilson was speaking at an election rally in Cardiff, speaking quietly about economic situation, when suddenly he thumped the podium and launched into a powerful denunciation of the opposition. After about one minute he stopped ranting as rapidly as he had begun and clearly returned to his speech. What had happened? Live TV was cutting to the rally. He knew this was to happen and had an aide stand at the back with a large white handkerchief. When the handkerchief dropped, the tirade began. The media dominated his agenda and were far more important than the people in front of him. (Source: John Humphrys Devils Advocate 2001)*

This story from the early days of TV shows how politicians rapidly sensed the power of the mass media and consciously adjusted their message so as to manage their media image. This, many argue, has become the self-conscious preoccupation of politicians today. Of course there is nothing new about spin. There are ancient stories about a king who would surround himself with people who would advise as to how a particular speech or action would be viewed by the ordinary people. What has changed is the power of the mass media to relay such messages so that no politician can expect to retain power if they are not very careful about how they are portrayed in the press.

Two vital factors about a healthy society might be drawn out at this stage:

The first is the interplay between **spin and substance**. No story can be relayed without interpretation, but there is a proper balance between evidence and interpretation. Where the interests of the teller become so powerful that the evidence is perceived to be distorted, then the hearers will cry out. This is precisely the serious charge that lies behind the Hutton enquiry. Did the government override the balanced judgements of others about weapons of mass destruction in order to pursue their own political objectives? We should expect a government to put things in the best possible light but still retain a proper critical stance toward the available evidence.

Another, very different, example of spin taking precedence over substance would be David Irving's attempts to deny the realities of the holocaust, which were investigated in court a few years ago. The judge decided that Irving's prejudices had led to an abuse of available evidence.

A society which loses track of what is real is in deep trouble. (See several examples in the resources section.)

The second has to do with how an obsession with the media might lead to a **corruption of politics**. Management of the media is likely to be something largely

hidden from public gaze, undertaken by a special cadre of people, who are themselves likely to view politics in the starkest power dimension and without public scrutiny of their actions. Such power struggles may generate a culture that is little more than bullying and threat. Warning signs that this has set in have been revealed through the Hutton enquiry. For example an email from Tom Kelly, Downing St Spokesman, said

“This is now a game of chicken with the Beeb.” “The only way they (the BBC) will shift is (if) they see the screw tightening.”

Likewise Alastair Campbell’s diary reported the hope that ‘outing’ David Kelly’s would “f\*\*\* Gilligan”.

A culture of such simple power struggle might easily lose its grip on proper moral sensitivities, as illustrated by Jo Moore’s notorious email the day after the World Trade Centre disaster saying “This is a good day to bury bad news.” In one sense she was doing precisely what she was paid to do, managing the government’s media profile. Yet the juxtaposition of these words with the tragedy offended against the public grief. And it pointed to the inadequate moral sense that is so potentially destructive if such thinking is actually motivating government.

The most important antidote to media dominance of a society may not be new rules about civil servants and political agents (though these may play a part) but rather new means to involve the public in the processes of decision-making in the society. Media domination can all too easily render us passive and lead to feelings that we are being manipulated. This can lead to a loss in confidence in politics in general, compound voter apathy and seriously undermine the trust that is at the heart of democratic politics. One of Agora’s chief aims is to create new opportunities for the highest possible quality of public conversation in society. It may play a part in addressing this need.

Finally, and in case any sense of ‘bash the media and politicians’ is setting in, the conversation might go to

**Question Three. Have you ever noticed yourself telling your own story to someone with an obvious spin? Why did you do this?**

If people are honest here they may realise that many of us put a very positive gloss on the stories of our own lives, protecting our self-esteem. Alternatively some run themselves down. The sharing of stories may be one way in which we test out our perspectives of ourselves and others and come to a more sober estimate of ourselves.

Translated into the public sphere this principle could be stated in terms of the health of any society being measured by the quality of its public conversation. How do different perspectives on this issue get themselves heard? What is the quality of investigative journalism? Where are ordinary people able to engage with others about this? How does the government listen to the people? It is through such processes that a society works for truth and right and carries its people in a bond of trust.

## Resources

There are a great variety of ways that a conversation like this can actually be handled. Here are some resources that may inspire other approaches, offer different tacks to go on and incorporate different perspectives. Some might be used to develop the conversation into a much broader discussion of 'spin' culture.

If you would like to use a **film clip** to spark the discussion then how about a short piece from

*Wag the dog* – a prophetic tale about political spin

Or

*The Matrix* – the ultimate scenario of people manipulation and confusion of fantasy with reality

If you would like to think further about the power of the media in such as advertising then

select a **set of ads** from a major prime time TV show. Watch them through several times. What sort of audience are they aiming at? How does this fit in with the show they are placed with? What human motivations are they playing on?

(for the power of advertising particularly with regard to young people see Naomi Klein's *No logo* especially her discussion of Channel One in America)

Companies have become masters of spin. **Brand identities** can become powerfully associated in our mind with some of our deepest desires. In the *Hero and the Outlaw* Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson argue that brands are doing a social service today. They allow us to associate some of our deepest longings with a product so giving us a story. You want to be an outlaw, buy the Harley. You see yourself as the great lover, The lady loves Milk Tray. Here is a story about Coca Cola that may interest.

Coke was worried about its ongoing battle with Pepsi. It set out to find an improved formula and conducted blind taste trials on hundreds of people. At last they were completely sure that they had come up with a product that people preferred to both Pepsi and the original Coke. They invested millions in developing the product and had a great launch event. All went well until a few people got together and said, "Hey but its not the real thing. I was brought up on Coke. Coke is part of what America stands for" – or words to that effect. And it caught on. More and more people began to long for the original Coke because of what it meant to them. Finally some Coke directors were eating out in Europe and the waiter came in beaming and declared that he had something special for them. He proudly brought in a bottle of the original Coke. That made the directors face what was happening. They began to sell Coke original again. The new Coke might taste better but it did not relate to the great American dream. It was not the real thing! Or you might say that the spin was more important than the substance! (Story taken from Trouble at the top BBC2 Feb 2 2003)

If you have a **storyteller** in your group, you may enjoy using Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Emperor's new clothes'. Many will know the story but it is a great way into spin culture in more senses than one. The rogues weave a story without any substance and the Emperor is left exposed!

## **Making faith connections**

Many faiths use narrative. One way of introducing the Judaeo-Christian scriptures to people is to view them simply as a set of narratives trying to make sense of life, yet narratives told with the belief that there was a God who was the focus of all that was true and good. It seems that this belief led them to value core virtues like trustworthiness, honesty and integrity and to seek for the expression of these in public life.

Some groups may like to study **Isaiah 59**, which was probably written after the exile in the early days of Persian rule. The prophet is clearly concerned about the quality of public life and proclaims that 'truth has fallen in the public squares.' (v14) Notice the different examples given of what was wrong with the public life of that society. Consider how these relate to core virtues like honesty, trustworthiness and integrity and to the pressures on our modern situation.

### **Or take a different tack**

Biblical stories were usually reflections on real situations by people who had differing views about what was really important. In this respect they were like every realistic story that we tell today and contain 'spin' in the sense of some overall message which the writer was trying to get across in the interpretation of events. Some theologians would argue that the different perspectives on God and society that are present in the scriptures actually add to the overall sense of revelation, making for a bigger picture of both the world and God.

Spin in biblical narratives can be introduced by thinking about the social impact of the way that a story is told. What did this story do to the community that first heard it? What does it reveal of the social concerns of the writer?

Compare **the story of the manna and the quails** in the book of Numbers (Numbers 11 v4 ff) with **Oliver Twist** asking for more food in Dicken's novel. Similar facts, meagre, boring food, a complaint, shocked response, warnings of a terrible future. But an extraordinarily different spin to the stories. What impact were these stories meant to have on the hearers? Many of the stories of the book of Numbers hinge around God's anger toward the people as they challenge their God-given leadership. A very different view of the wilderness wanderings is given by Jeremiah.(Jer 2 v2,3). His writings tell us of God who actually inspires complaints against leadership and is particularly concerned about issues of poverty (Jer 22 v13ff).

**Look at the way that John's gospel portrays 'the Jews'**.(especially Chapter 8, not obvious in some of the more modern translations) Can you sense spin in this? Does it help you to know that the writer may have lived at a time when there were very serious issues between the synagogues and the emerging church?

For those with a deeper theological interest then there is potential to study the four gospels as different perspectives on the life of Jesus. What can you find out about the way that these different gospel writers spun their accounts to emphasise what they saw as the most important elements of his life?

The struggle between **spin and substance** is one way of describing a central issue in theology in the twentieth century. As scholars became aware of the influence of the writers upon the gospels and other biblical books, so it was necessary to ask how much a writer actually felt free to tell the story as they saw fit, complete with their own

spin, and from the perspective of their own situation and how much they were restrained by the received tradition and evidence of eyewitnesses.

You may want to use this summary chart and summary sheet, which illustrate key points about the role of narrative in our personal lives and the life of a society.

## Summary Chart

### So what's in a story?

Who am I?	Self - identity
What's happening?	Making sense of experience
Why am I doing this?	Giving reason for action
What is important to me?	Deep level commitments
Where do I belong?	Community identity

## *Summary Sheet*

### **'Getting at the truth - politics and the media, stories, values and commitments'**

The story is the most basic means by which the human being attempts to make sense of their experience. In constructing a story we attempt to draw our experiences together into a coherent whole, making sense of them in terms of our own implicit commitments about life. It is by means of stories that we give reason for our actions.

Much of the substance of conversation is the implicit sharing of stories. As we share a story we are effectively saying to another, 'This is how I see the world' and inviting them also to see the world this way. They will typically respond with another story which challenges or refines our own interpretation such that the process of conversation becomes the pursuit of truth and right.

The quality of public conversation then becomes a prime signal of the health of a society. The domination of public space by the media and the resulting impoverishment of public debate thereby give significant cause for concern.

Communities shape and buttress their own identities by means of story. A healthy story is one that both upbuilds the community and remains open to the perspective of the outsider or 'enemy'.

Each of us forms our own story continuously. It gives us our sense of identity and is our chief resource in giving account of our actions. Some of those with mental/ addictive problems can be understood as being unable to make sense of their place in the world by means of story.

While science is applicable to those aspects of human life that can be analysed into pieces and reconstructed, the human mind works as a whole. This means that any account of human life that includes the hidden purposes of the mind needs to work by a process of imagination. We imagine the situation of another and construct a story to give account of their actions. This is the method that underlies all the humanities, including politics, sociology, history... wherever an account needs to be given of human purposes, story is the proper methodology.

The Bible is a story-formed account of human experience. People sought to make sense of their lives in terms of a commitment to a God who was the focus and definition of all that was good and right and true and who was in authority over the world. It records their growing understanding of God as they struggled with the realities of life and as they debated the good among themselves. It therefore implicitly contains accounts of individual lives, the political formation of societies, the place of the market, the role of leadership and many other aspects of public life, all being formed by reflection on their basic commitment to the God who was all good. This meant that the ongoing search to know God better was at the same time the search to order all aspects of their public life in the best way.

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