

China in a spin: when public relations is its own worst enemy

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China's leaders are learning PR lessons quickly over their Olympic torch disaster, but not quickly enough. I [wrote](#) here a few weeks ago about my meeting with a worried Chinese official from their London embassy. But neither of us thought their public diplomacy strategy would go this badly wrong. Now they have resorted to a tactic pioneered by the White House (and to a lesser extent Downing Street) by playing the [terrorist](#) card.



Beijing is saying it has uncovered a [plot](#) by separatists to disrupt the Games this summer. I guess they hope that this will win sympathy and distract from the great Olympic Torch Tour [disaster](#). It is another sign of how badly they have managed the relationship between reality and PR.

Beijing hoped that the Games would project the image of a China that is changing and becoming more open and tolerant of dissent. To inaugurate this PR campaign they decided to indulge in a heavy-handed crackdown on protests in Tibet. Then they use the same Special Forces to protect the torch. So we witness children's TV presenters being wrestled in London streets by burly bluetracksuited security men. It was like a nasty version of [It's A Knockout](#).

I can't remember a more perfect [PR storm](#). It makes Neil Kinnock's [Sheffield Rally](#) or the British Airways luggage sorting system seem like acts of popularist genius. How bad do you have to be to turn hosting the world's most popular sporting event into a global advertisement for your reactionary politics

In fact the only person that comes close in terms of PR suicide is a certain Prime Minister who took over a united party and a stable economy with a significant poll lead only to go 20% behind within six months. Gordon Brown hasn't yet ordered an armed crackdown on the Welsh, but as he dithers and bores his way to electoral disaster it seems that is all he needs to emulate the Chinese PR burn-out.

Last night there was a [debate](#) about whether PR is ruining journalism. I think recent events show that PR is ruining PR. All journalism needs to do is stand back and watch it implode.

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