

SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SPIN AND SPIN DOCTORS

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Abstract— In time of professionalization of permanent political campaigns with organized and orchestrated media campaign we are witnesses of growing importance of spin and spin doctors. This article is following academic determination and categorization of spin, spin techniques that are employed by spin doctors and their social consequences. Goal of this article is, in time of political campaign to put more attention on role of spin doctors in the design of political reality.

Index Terms— Spin, Spin Doctors and Political Communication

1 INTRODUCTION

The term “spin” in political communication is borrowed from sports, specifically baseball, where the one who throws the ball switching it in the way that is hard to predict its trajectory by the one who needs to catch it. Spin of information aims to interpret information presented in a way that corresponds to a particular political entity. Politicians and their PRs hope with spin of information to reach the public without the intervention of critical journalism. From the perspective of politicians, spin is necessity because critical journalism is constantly looking for scandals and ways to destruct their communication with citizens (Partington 2010: 15). The term “spin” for the first time was mentioned in a political context in 1977 when American novelist Saul Bellow, in his Jefferson Lecture, said that in order for political actors to come up with victory in the presidential election, they should use the services of spin doctors (Esser 2008: 4783). The term "spin" first appeared in the media on January 22, 1979 in an article published in the Guardian Weekly, while the term "spin doctor" for the first time appeared in the media on 21 October 1984 in an editorial in the New York Times written by Jack Rosenthal. The editorial analyzed the debate between Ronald Reagan and presidential candidate of the Democratic Party Walter Mondale in the 1984 election campaign. The editorial implied that role of spin doctors is important for the final outcome of the campaign (Lilleker 2006: 194). Since then the term spin is present both in public life and in political communication, but at the center of public attention it again came in the 1990s when New Labor of Tony Blair, in an attempt to revitalize the party, used new techniques of political communication as a spin of information (Morris and Goldsworthy 2008: 154; McNair 2000: 6). For instance, in 1998 non-election year in the United Kingdom, in The Guardian, were published not less than 511 stories that referred to spin doctors (De Veerse and Elenbaas 2011: 79). According to Moloney (2000: 107) there are two reasons why spin and spin doctors were actualized as a topic in the 1990s. The first reason is the fascination of the public, particularly in the UK with individuals that create the image of certain enterprises, social groups, and political parties. The second reason is the impact of PR on mass culture and impressions of the public by the power of political PR (spin

doctors) that shape public perception towards certain political processes, events, parties and leaders from the background. In scientific circles use of the term "spin" began in the 1990s, but there are indications that some authors do not take it seriously, because it is not a neutral scientific concept as communication, nor is self-determination concept that describes a particular profession as public relations. The term spin is used often by journalists in order to discredit and mystify political PR (Esser 2008: 4784).

According to Robin Brown (2003), the spin should be understood as a form of intentional relations between press officers and journalists that are established on the basis of mutually accepted rules and proactive approach of PRs, which are guided by the desire to provide the most favorable conditions for public presentation for their customers. Brown suggests methods and organizational techniques used in spin. Political journalist Michelle Grattan (1998: 34) determines the spin as a highly professional selling of political messages which includes the maximum use and manipulation of the media. In this, spin involves the definition and distribution of messages to the public. Theaker (2001: 36), however, sees the spin as a media management, ie the media agenda. According to Hartman and Chomsky (1995) spin is created as a result of the omnipresence of media. According to Yantao (2012: 124) spin is characteristic of the age of television, where viewers percept politics and political parties, more based on the visual image than on the expressed statements, with the formation of perception more influenced by emotion rather than reason. In this context, the spin doctors have the opportunity to influence the perception of viewers. Spin doctors are people who stand between politicians and the media. They have the responsibility to create and sell to the public the image of politicians. Whereupon crucial is the relationship between spin doctors, journalists, the media and control over media agenda.

Spin, as a technique for management of news is sometimes counterproductive (Watts 2007: 251; Tample 2008: 154). Such was the case with the Labor Party, whose spin doctors on briefings informed editors to announce that early elections will be organized in 2009. Analysis of the Labor Party showed that early elections would be a risky move for the party. Then

the Labor Party distanced itself from the early elections, indicating that it is an atmosphere that is created in the public, but not the official position of the party. To those statements of the Labor Party, responded the political editor of the Daily Mail, Benedict Brogan, who came up with the view that the spin doctors of the Labor Party brief political correspondents for the possibility of maintaining early elections. After this event, the media began to distance itself from the Labor Party and increasingly began to suggest that the president of the Conservative Party, David Cameron, has the necessary qualities to be elected for the next Prime Minister of Great Britain.

2 SPIN DOCTORS

Spin doctors are experts for communication that are using techniques and skills to place a specific message in public in a way that will cause the desired feelings and reactions (Stockman 2007: 10). The work of spin doctors is to create media reality in favor of their clients (Yantao 2012: 125). In the US and the UK, all major political parties have their press officers, who are responsible for maintaining relationships with the media and sending messages to the public in organized manner. These individuals are often called spin doctors. Spin doctors in many cases are quite unpopular among journalists, who accuse them of manipulation of information (Partington 2010: 16). According to some authors the term spin doctor is not only for the press officers, but includes other occupations that have an impact on public perception. According to Esser, Reinemann and Fan (2001: 27) the term spin doctors include: professional political consultants, media and PR specialists with serious political experience and politicians with serious experience in the organization of political campaigns.

A good example of how spin doctors work is exemplified by the New Labour of Tony Blair and their spin doctor Alastair Campbell. Before they began with the reform of welfare state, they first promoted it. The first speech of Tony Blair, who promoted this reform, was held in Dudley. Days before speech being held, Alastair Campbell began briefing reporters with information about the cost paid by citizens caused by misuses of the welfare state. The next day in two national newspapers, *The Time* and *the Mirror*, appeared Tony Blair's article that had the same points as Alastair Campbell's briefing. At night, Blair delivered a speech in Dudley in which he spoke about the fact that something must be done to stop misusing of the welfare state (Theaker 2001: 36).

Theaker (2001: 36) points out that for the spin doctors in the UK it is much easier to spin information and manage media agenda in domestic media, rather than international. Good examples are the debates on the euro zone and the war in Iraq. In these questions, politicians fail to control the agenda of the international media. Jones (1999) suggests that the UK government is the institution that is mostly dedicated on spin of information. The government insists on proactive management of the news and news agenda. Press secretary of the Prime Minister, briefs the media twice on daily basis, selects ministers for interviews, and reconstructs the stories in favor of the government.

3 CATEGORIZATION OF SPIN

Depending on the entity that spin and purpose of the spin, Hicks (2009) distinguishes between:

- Defensive spin in the first person
- Defensive surrogate spin
- Offensive spin in the first person
- Offensive surrogate spin

Defensive spin in the first person is a spin in which political actor who is the target of criticism, spin information by giving an opinion, view, explanation, justification for the content of criticism. Because, the person that spins is put in an awkward situation he is trying to control the conditions under which he provides the information by organizing a press conference, distribution of pre-recorded statement or organizing interviews with previously agreed issues.

Defensive surrogate spin is that kind of spin in which is included a third entity that seemingly has no interest in trying to present her arguments, opinion, interpretation of certain information or event that justified or displays in a completely different light, the entity which is the subject of criticism. As surrogates or third parties, in spin of information, could be used NGOs, political parties, prominent figures etc.

Offensive spin in the first person is the kind of spin in which a political entity, interprets events and information in a way that criticizes or politically disqualifies from the competition another political entity. Subject of criticism is the credibility of the opponent political entity.

Offensive surrogate spin is that kind of spin in which criticism, disqualification of some political subject comes not from the direct opponent in a political contest, but from a third entity that seemingly has no interest to do that. Surrogate spins are usually more successful and more used than spin in the first person, because the entities that spin information have a higher credibility among the public. Public trusts much more in such entities, because there is no obvious reason, why they would be biased in giving their opinion or interpreting a particular event.

4 TECHNIQUES OF SPIN

According to Gaber (2000), spin as technique for management of information consists of two types of activity. The first includes the organization of press conferences, press releases, briefings, interviews with politicians and their advisers and distribution of speeches etc. The second type of activity relates to preparation and processing of information that include:

- To be consistent and not send contradictory messages
- Exclusive information to be given to some selected journalists
- Counterattack as defence strategy

- Confirmation of stories, before the details and evidence are to be published
- Timing, in placement of positive or negative stories. Promotion of positive and marginalization of negative stories.
- Replacement, attempt to produce good news to cover bad news for the client's interests

Tample (2008) which quotes Manning (2001) states that among the techniques used by spin doctors are included: the establishment of good relations with the media, the delivery of current information to the media, knowledge of the value of the information that is available and that is delivered to the media, familiarity with the work of journalists and media business in general and the establishment of good relations with the centers of power for which spin doctors work.

5 SPIN AND ITS CRITICISM

Spin as a technique for management of news that is often placed in a negative connotation and is synonymous for biased portrayal of political events, actors, parties and ideologies (Stockman 2007: 8). Remarks on account of spin are following:

- Spin is often framed in terms of bypassing the truth, which reduces confidence in the political parties, which has its consequences in the declining turnout in elections as a key institution for each representative democracy. Accordingly, spin ultimately is a key factor for delegitimization of democracy as a political system.
- Spin doctors are threatening the freedom of journalists to select the topics for which they write and the way they do it (Moliney 2,000,109).
- Also, the use of spin entails engagement of professional spin doctors; it costs a lot of money and puts at a disadvantage candidates that can't afford it. As Yantao (2012: 124) noted, candidates that are not using services of spin doctors, almost don't have a chance of winning. This means that the victory of elections depends on how much funds someone has for the engagement of spin doctors, rather than the ideas that one has to solve the practical problems of citizens.

From its appearance in the 1980s spin almost always has been put into negative context and it has been seen as a set of manipulative and non-ethical techniques for communicating with the public. But already in the 1990s spin was accepted as part of the political reality (Wilcox and Cameron 2006). Thus,

McNear (2000) developed a positive image of spin that is based on the impulses of individuals to present themselves in public in the best possible light and their words to be properly understood. Spin according to McNear contributes to increasing the quantity of information that is circulating in public, better coverage of political events and more rigorous and more effective critique of them. In addition, the spin should be seen as a dialectical process which involves certain opponent minded political parties of which ultimately benefit has the public at large. Namely, if all opponent political parties use the services of spin doctors, they will produce best possible presentation of their candidates and will undergo systematic reviews other opponents. The public will have all that information so it can form an opinion for each of the political party. Thus, one could say that spin could potentially intensify the democratic processes in society.

6 THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE EMERGENCE OF SPIN

The era of spin has its social consequences. According to Pearson and Patching (2008: 47-51), they could be reduced to:

- Impacts over news agenda. Journalists have become too dependent on political parties, politicians, their press secretaries that dictate the news agenda.
- Influence on journalism, coverage and content of the news. In the age of spin, more attention is paid to the interpretation of facts, rather than just a fact. Facts are taken just as basis that are later interpreted by spin doctors according to interests of their clients.
- Impact on popular culture. Politicians influenced by spin doctors have become part of popular culture or celebrity and politics began to be personalized.
- The increase in the number of people working in the field of communications and increase in the government budgets for the promotion of particular projects. Thus data for the UK show multiple increases of staff in the field of professional communicators and messages that government agencies send to the public (Pearson and Patching 2008: 51).
- Impact on the quality of democracy. Famous statements of the father of PR, Edward Bernays that with the help of PR, elites can rule the masses in a democratic society. Nowadays modern PR has developed sophisticated methods of managing the media (Bernays and Miller 2005)

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