

When Perception Becomes Reality and Truth is Relative: Spin Strategies and Political Influence over Media Reporting in Macedonian Media

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Ko percepcija postane resničnost in resnica relativna: spin strategije in politični vpliv na poročanje v makedonskih medijih

ABSTRACT

The power of politicians presenting itself in front of the public rests in the media, so politicians are likely to use the media to create the preferred media frames and to set the agenda (agenda setting). Worldwide, spin-doctors have their own influence in the modeling of the media reality, processes that are comparable in Macedonia as well. The paper strive to describe the presence of the spinning in Macedonia and its impact on the news content. Furthermore, it deals with the spinning tactics and their manifestation in the political communication, explaining the models in which political spinning is functioning in Macedonia. Main research questions are focused on: (1) how does the process of creating the news is carry out and what affects the news content production; (2) what specific strategic doctrines spin-doctors are using to influence the process of daily reporting and to participate in the creation of the media reality; (3) how the spin-doctors present information and communicate with the public and what methods and tools are characteristic for spinning cycles.

Keywords: spin, political communication, media, political influence, journalism.

JEL classification codes: C7, D7, D8

POVZETEK

Moč politikov, ki se predstavljajo pred javnostjo, je v medijih, zato bodo politiki verjetno medije uporabili za ustvarjanje prednostnih medijskih okvirov in določitev dnevnega reda (agenda setting). Po vsem svetu imajo "spin-doktorji" vpliv na ustvarjanje medijske resničnosti, in ti procesi so primerljivi tudi v Makedoniji. Članek si prizadeva opisati prisotnost spina v Makedoniji in njegov vpliv na vsebino novic. Ukvarja se tudi s taktikami spina in njihovo manifestacijo v političnem komuniciranju, ki pojasnjuje modele, v katerih

deluje politični spin v Makedoniji. Glavna raziskovalna vprašanja so osredotočena na to: (1) kako se izvaja proces ustvarjanja novic in kaj vpliva na produkcijo novic; (2) katere specifične strateške doktrine uporabljajo "spin-doktorji" za vplivanje na proces dnevnega medijskega poročanja in sodelovanje pri ustvarjanju medijske resničnosti; (3) kako "spin-doktorji" predstavljajo informacije in komunicirajo z javnostjo ter kakšne metode in orodja so značilni za cikel spina.

Ključne besede: spin, politično komuniciranje, mediji, politični vpliv, novinarstvo.

JEL klasifikacija: C7, D7, D8

1 Introduction

The process of producing news in a newsroom is multilayered, continuous and interactive. News categorized as information worthy of publishing undergoes several different processes determining the angle of the story and presenting the topic, sources to be used and statements quoted, the context and background information to the audiences and explanation for them for both - the value and the significance of the news itself. The professional qualifications of the journalist, but also those of their editors, the cultural values they espouse, their social status, ethnic affiliation, experience accrued, and the overall environment in which they live and work has its impact on the news production as well.

The process of creating news further relies on the media's concepts their approach to reporting, the programming or publishing section in which it is presented, and the genre. Moreover, the manner in which journalists process certain information is closely tied to the editorial policies of the media they are employed by, their ownership, the economic circumstances in which the media operate, the political ties of the media's owners, the (un)regulated status of journalists, the (non)existence of newsroom policies, and the impact of advertising on journalistic work.

Political communication theory clearly outlines the exceptional importance of the processes under which the communication between the media and the political actors takes place (Kavanagh, 1995, 10–11). Over the course of these processes, message placement and the decision whether it will be presented as news or not, relies solely on editors, and individuals working in public relations are well aware of that fact. This is why the latter attempt to sell the political messages as information worthy of publishing, or, news of importance and interest to the general public. Should they succeed in their endeavour, the political messages which are not necessarily actual information of interest to the public, are attached greater credibility by the general public, as they are not being presented as paid advertisements, but rather as news, and hence reducing the gaps between politicians and the electorate (Gandy, 1992, 143–4).

The theory of political communication emphasizes that spin strategies utilize framing as a model of communication and agenda setting which, even according to Edward Bernays (1923, 1928a, 1928b), represents construction of public opinion. Spinning interprets truth and distorts it, while spin doctors are not interested in creating a mutually useful relation between the creator of the message and the public, but are rather focused on relating their own political agenda to the public via the media.

Sidney Blumenthal points out that spinning in political communication has its own specific features such as a state of constant campaigning, increased focus on communication, conducting polls and public segmentation. In that order, the strategy of constant campaigning allows for the overlying messages of politicians to be remembered by the citizens, thus impacting media agendas as well. As PR specialists claim, this state of constant campaigning and having a continuous presence in the media means that politicians are able to gain credibility in the eyes of the public (Blumenthal, 1980, 73). Bruce Brendan, on the other hand, underlines that politicians do not seek to hear the demands of the electorate, but rather solicit a reaction from them on what they have already set out to do and the media only serve as their instrument for doing so. (Brendan, 1992, 81).

2 Method

The news production is constantly being closely studied by researchers analysing the impact that the media have on the general public and their place in society. As part of the research conducted to establish both the overlaying specifics and significance of spinning to the creation of media reality in Macedonia, a semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen journalists and editors who have been closely following and reporting on developments about the negotiations between Macedonia and Greece on the name issue for a great number of years. The method used to select the sample chosen for the research is an intentional sample utilized to when views of certain individuals possessing specific and advanced knowledge on the issue being researched.

Taking into consideration societal and political characteristics in which Macedonian media operate, the journalists who have been interviewed were asked to not only describe the process of producing news directly related to the name issue, but also explain newsroom work rules. They were requested to outline all factors contributing the news production process, by the type of information selected to be reported and the criteria used to publish them, and professional standards applied when reporting. Structuring the interviews in such manner produced a quality analysis whereas the gathered empirical data provide a cross-section of how newsrooms operate, the process used to produce news, obstacles encountered by journalists reporting on the matter, internal and external factors impacting news on the name issue, the pressure exerted by political elites and government PR structures, as well as the ethical standards being applied (or not) in the media.

3 Research

In structural terms, the interviews are focused on the following five general questions: (1) What are the sources used to derive information, as well as the ways in which newsrooms report on the name issue; (2) The influence of editorial policies and the application of professional principles in the process of producing news on the name issue; (3) Are political actors in the issue providing scheduled and regular information to the media and are they having strategic communication with them; (4) Is the name issue being used or exploited to defocus the public's attention from daily political developments; and (5) What types of external influences are newsrooms subjected to and the ways in which journalist select experts to analyze the matter.

The analysis of the data acquired via these semi-structured interviews points to the serious state in which the media in Macedonia are, as well as the problems they are having as regards freedom of expression.

The analysis of the interviews points to a practice prevalent across Macedonian media and, first and foremost, specifically present among media outlets which editorial policies were closer aligned to the parties in power, whereby journalists are intentionally being infiltrated into newsrooms with the sole and specific task of pushing the politicians' daily agenda in the news agenda and carry out assignments they have been given by those politicians. Journalists working in such newsrooms confirm the existence of this “smoke and mirrors” strategy that Macedonian political actors employ. Its objective usually is to draw a smokescreen over things, push them out of balance and distort them in a way which would be acceptable to the source or the spin doctor and present them in that form to the general public. The overriding goal is to make the public accept the information placed as its own reality. These manipulative strategies are most successful when journalists who are completely controlled by political actors are part of one newsroom. The public will recognize reality as portrayed by the media, not questioning whether that media reality is the one actually existing. Perception becomes reality and truth is relative (Heath, 2006).

4 Key Observations and Discussion

The journalists interviewed were equivocal that official sources of information are closed to the public and the media when the name issue is concerned. This lack of openness can be identified by the manner in which government representatives communicate with the media. They usually communicate with the media via dull press releases containing very few information presented in the shape of merely technical news. In addition, the public sometimes receive delayed, but also selective information, intended only for those media outlets with the editorial policies closely aligned to those of the government. These media outlets are often provided with exclusive information by official sources but they are not explicitly stated in journalist texts.

The communication of political actors with the Macedonian media is unusual for a pluralistic and modern democratic society, and research has indicated flagrant violations of widely accepted standards of political communication and media freedom. The control of information and news in the media on the name issue and in a broader context is taking place on a massive scale, even going as far as journalists receiving specific instruction on what and when is something to be published with the added explanation that they, the political communicators, are the ones to tell and allow them to publish a certain piece of information in a time of their own choosing.

The control that political elites exert over journalist content produced by newsrooms is as strong as the overall pressure they exert on the media and journalist on a daily basis. In pro-government media outlets, journalists were allowed create journalist content which is within a defined political framework, being provided with clear instructions on how they should produce the news about the name issue. It seems that a critical journalist viewpoint, as well as an analytical or different portrayal of the matter is practically impossible. Journalists in these media outlets accept the party political strategy as their own, do not ask much and proceed with carrying out their professional duties as journalists, in spite of being aware that Macedonian citizens are not sufficiently informed on the course of the negotiations on the name issue and what Macedonia and Greece are actually negotiating on.

This lack of transparency in the process provides politicians with an opportunity to use the name dispute in their local political contexts, portraying one political block as patriotic in the media, and the other as a traitor to national interests. Simultaneously, speculation is widely

spread across the media on this issue which primarily benefit the government strategy aimed at persuading the public that Greece is the side acting unconstructively in dealing with the issue.

On the other hand, a section of pro-government media outlets is enjoying constant coordination with the government PR office on messages to be placed as main events of the day. In this manner, the citizens are provided with promotional political messages placed as news and information and they are presented in the main news cast or the front pages of daily newspapers in that manner.

Nearly all journalists interviewed agree on the fact that the name issue is being used as a smokescreen for other developments taking place in Macedonia simultaneously, defocus the debate on questions that actually matter. The name issue is also used and exploited by all political parties, while further strengthening the national and patriotic sentiments of the Macedonians.

Even when it comes to the way in which newsrooms select experts as sources of information, most of the experts actually are preaching same points as political parties they affiliated with. The testimonies from the interviewed journalists stated that these experts are part of the manipulation and this is one of the way how information is controlled via the use of these experts as a qualified source. These experts play a role which usually entails presenting to the public what the politicians want to be heard, either directly on their behalf or in support of government policies. When it comes to the name issue, creating media reality does not rely on journalists themselves, but rather on politicians and, as such, is being pursued by exerting control over information in a strict manner. Journalists usually know beforehand what selected expert will say and they are using them just to remain within the editorial policy of the media they are employed by.

Spinning is focused on the reputation of party leaders. As political theoreticians state, good reputation creates a political identity which is difficult to destroy. In the long run, image can never superimpose on what matters most in politics - the contents that the actors involved in the political process place. Nevertheless, in the short term, when it comes to interpreting matters and distorting them to suit the needs of politics, spin is a successful tool and tactics of political communication representing a virtual dialogue with the electorate, i.e. the citizens.

Ivor Gaber (2000) structured the activities of spin doctors in handling media agendas by disaggregating them to several segments. The first of these segments entails selecting journalists to be provided with exclusive information on certain developments. Thereafter, texts are placed in printed media the authors of which are trending or renowned political representatives who have been tasked with incorporating in their texts the main messages that are to be presented to the public. The next segment is constructing intermediate stories to deflect the attention of journalists from a certain inconvenient piece of information and push it as down as possible on the journalist agenda. One spinning technique coming to fore is providing journalists with material on political opponents and publicly patronizing those opponents in order to paint an image of them being incompetent. Pre crises management is a tactical step of assuming potential problems and offering all potential answers to the public in advance.

One thing deserving lesser, but still important role in a spinning tactic is positive reporting on a certain development and hence clouding another negative development, emphasising just

the positive aspects from the news, or camouflaging a specific negative development with other negative news just to create a grey zone for the public and to blur the most important news information for the public. A well-known spinning tactic that Gaber underlines in his book is laundering bad news with a good one, thus bleaching the bad news in the news production process.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of the material acquired by the interviews with journalists and editors indicates that all features of spin are being used by political actors in Macedonia when communicating with the media. However, what is most concerning in this regard is the manner in which the political elites and their spin doctors communicate with journalists cannot be easily traced and spin becomes a constituent part of the information and communication system used to impact public opinion and broader audience.

Control and constant pressure on journalists are important factors when we are analysing political communication not just in Macedonia but in the developed European democratic practices. Namely, should fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of expression and freedom of the press be brought into danger by political actors with their constant imposition on newsrooms and forcing of their political agendas rather than media ones, media pluralism and ensuring diverse opinions would be in great danger, neutralising the basic role that media play in society and making them irrelevant.

In that manner, spinning in Macedonia does not have an impact on creating media reality, but rather spin doctors directly place their own reality while journalists merely transmit it to the public. The ultimate consequence of that is that the media outlet becomes a platform for political actors to compete upon, without the possibility of a critical debate or posing simple questions on any topic, even the name issue and the negotiations with Greece.

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