

The spin doctor: an alternative approach of public relations in albanian administration?!

*Blerina Gjerazi**

Abstract

This study will focus on the approaches of public relations in the Albanian administration and its cooperation with journalists in spreading information through various channels. Taking as a study case the Albanian Justice System, the paper will discuss the following questions:

1. Is spinning emerging as an alternative of PR in Albanian administration?
2. What are the dominant characteristics of public information?
3. As a result, are there implications for mass communication theory and for the practice of journalism?

Using communication and public relations theories intertwined with empirical evidences, the study suggests that spin doctor can be considered as a distinguished communication role, but at its infancy. Putting a positive spin on events, shedding the truth and spreading the information via mass communication channels raises the discussion of information trends and perception to the potential publics. As information technology is in continuous development, as social media are increasingly challenging the traditional media, the effectiveness of spin is in question.

Keywords: *Public relation, spin doctor, public administration, justice system*

Introduction

Public relations (PR) and the creation of a positive image are subsequent and longstanding efforts of many public and nongovernmental institutions. Because of its nature and content,

* *PHD Candidate, University of Tirana, Faculty of History and Philology, Department of Journalism and Communication*

public relations have been identified as bodies in defense of the institution they represent and are often perceived as structures that do not follow the public interest. The conceptual image about the functioning of public relations has been also depicted as the result of perceptions of society and media workers. A wide debate in academic and professional groups about the role and functions of public relations, has been dominated in recent years. Various studies have shown that the term "public relations" suggests image building, reputation management and continuous efforts to persuade.

As one of the professions with complex dynamics, not exhaustive and in continuous development, public relations receive a particular connotation in the state administration, especially in the justice system. By analyzing the institutions of the justice system, this paper will show if the typology of institutions and internal organization influence the using of "spin doctors". From an institutional perspective, these structures can be categorized as closed and half open institutions, as a result of the classified information that relates to public security. So there are some cases that judicial hearings are closed to the public and the media, not every detail of the investigation of the prosecution on various issues is published, as it could affect the safety of the investigation and the public often does not have enough information regarding the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty in prisons. Based on the recommendation of the European Union in the general planning of government, transparency with the public and the media has been converted into internal institutional objective, while the reform in justice institutions rank has been set as the most important.

Through the use of communication research methods, combining three elements that of theoretical, analytical, comparative, and using the data of the institutions of the justice system, this study suggests that public relations in the justice system as a result of the dominance of the asymmetrical communication axioms, promotes public perceptions on the use of "spin doctors".

Meaning and theoretical analysis of "spin doctors"

The power of public relations is the word. Word has served as means of reaction, awareness and conviction to change either deep beliefs, traditional habits, the reform of the social structure and even the history. Miller and Dinan in their book "A Century of Spin" argue that:

*"The powers of public relations are mysterious in the sense that they are not well known. They are shrouded in secrecy and deception, which often enables PR....to pursue their objectives undetected."*¹

Additional factors of the misperceptions of the role of public relations are the negative portrayal in film productions. To strengthen their argument Dinan Miller brings the example of the Udi Allen film "Zeling", the human chameleon who takes part in the most important historical events and can be transformed into the role of every person. The question is whether the public relations are a "zeling" whose transformations can result in spin doctors? Based on various interviews with public relations experts, James notes that their greatest concern was the way they wanted the public to think about a process, behavior, project, person, etc. Murray adds another perspective regarding the practice. She underlines that "while others sit, public relations specialists "weave"". Delivering of planned media messages, clearly dictates "the direction of a story done masterfully and artfully entirely for the benefit of the institution."²

Esser also analyzes in depth the meaning of this term. He explains that spin doctors , [in Albanian, doctor of false allegations] is an amalgam of the word "spin" which means interpretation or distortion imposed on an event and "doctor", using the figurative sense of the word, means to regulate, put together and forge. As to this author, the word "doctor" derives and has the professional connotation and not

¹ David Miller, William Dinan, *A Century of Spin: How Public Relations Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power*, Pluto Press, 2008, pg. 1

² Deanna M. Murray is a Director at "Build" Company, for the Strategy and Digital Marketing. Found on 12.04.2015 in <http://www.business2community.com/public-relations/others-sit-public-relations-professional-spins>

the amateur regarding the management of “false allegations.”³ Researchers and academics have openly expressed criticism about the use of public relations, in particular the use in daily work of “spin doctors”.

Sumpter and Tankard argue that “spin doctor” is an “obvious alternative model of public relations”.⁴ Perhaps the most critic among other authors, Heath notes that “public relations are the art of deception, false claims, abuse and showing themselves as polite”.⁵ Although these scholars and other researchers⁶ depict public relations as “masters of deception”, there are a considerable number opposing these definitions. Barrett in his arguments listed in the article titled “How to convince the New York Times that public relations are not the art of manipulation”, insists that the connotations associated with this discipline are a cliché list. In his view, it is known that public relations has an influential character, but they stay at the same level with authenticity and transparency, honesty and away false allegations.⁷

³ Frank Esser, “Spin Doctor”, *The International Encyclopedia of Communication. Rhetoric in Western Europe: France – Structuration Theory*, Volume X, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008, pg. 4783. Also, Esser provides a comprehensive overview of the development of “spin doctors”. This term was first cited by the American novelist Saul Bellow, who spoke in 1977 about getting American presidency with the help of “spin doctors”. “That phrase appeared for the first time on 21 October 1984, in a New York Times editorial commenting performances in television presidential debates. It had to be passed about a decade, until reviewed by academics: Maltse (1994, 215-216) discussed the importance of “spin doctors” for political communication and Sumpter and Tankard (1994) on public relations.”

⁴ Randall S. Sumpter, James W. Tankard, “The spin doctor: An alternative model of public relations”. *Public Relations Review*, 20(1), 1994, pg 19–27.

⁵ Cited at Lisa Fall and Jeremy Hughes “Reflections of Perceptions: Measuring the Effects Public Relations Education has on Non-majors’ Attitudes Toward the Discipline”, *Public Relations Journal* Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 2009

⁶ Coombs dhe Holladay, 2007; Fall, 2004; Ithor, 1999; Pinsdorf, 1999; Dilenschneider, 1999; Budd, 1997; Fombrun, 1996; Ewen, 1996

⁷ Steve Barrett, “How to persuade The New York Times that PR is not about spin”, October 24, 2014, available at <http://www.prweek.com/article/1318959/persuade-new-york-times-pr-not-spin>

Justice institutions and application of "spin doctor"

In the www.prweek.com site, an online poll was opened so to get the public opinions on public relations, and if they can be determined only as a tool of manipulation. The audience was given the opportunity to choose one of five options, as follows:

Is PR all about spin?

- * No, the profession has moved way beyond that.
- * Yes, let's stop kidding ourselves.
- * No, social media sees through spin immediately.
- * Yes, but spin is not necessarily a negative thing.
- * PR is an outdated and irrelevant term.

The data collected by online voters (up to 18.04.2015) indicated that 40.18% of the audience thought that the profession has moved from manipulative mechanisms. 31.25% thought, yes, but this mechanism is not necessarily negative. 15.18%, yes, let's stop kidding ourselves; 8.04%, public relations is an irrelevant and outdated term and 5.35% believe that social media will see and circulate it immediately.⁸

Bernays and Lippmann, approached the line of thought, as 31.25% of the audience on public relations. Their publications during 1922-1965, listed various arguments on portraying the influence on public opinion formation as a mechanism not necessarily negative. Lippmann in his book "Public Opinion" points out that "*a leader or an interest that can transform themselves into masters of actual symbols, is the master of the current situation.*"⁹ The scholar goes even further, arguing that being subjects of ongoing disruptions in the daily life, in order to be fair, we have to appreciate not only the information that is available, but also the minds that have filtered it. Bernays, known as the father of public relations and influential of new behaviors of twentieth-century, incites the theoretical and substantial debate about this discipline. He argues that:

⁸ See *ibid* 9

⁹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922, e-book, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org>

“Attitudes, assumptions, ideas or prejudices of the public, are consequences of definitive impact.”¹⁰

For Bernays the engineering consent process it constitutes the essence of a democratic process, based on the fact that being part of a democratic society, we possess the right to persuade and suggest. The approximate Machiavellian approach where the end justifies the means grounds theoretical basis to legitimate influence and change public behavior. In this case a question arises on the ultimate goal of public relations by which it means can be justified. Do they have to protect the interests of the public, or most of it, or mechanisms are put into motion intended to protect the image of the institution? By aligning these arguments with the case study, the decisions in the justice system are complex, multifaceted and often the role of a public relations expert is biased. The illustrated case of personal experience as a former head of public relations office may help to understand perceptions about this discipline.

In October 2010, I was appointed to accompany a French delegation, led by the former Justice Minister Robert Badinter, to assess the situation of juveniles in the Albanian penitentiary institutions. French media were present to report on the visit. During the introductory presentation, the former minister said: “Very interesting, we will be accompanied by a communications person”. During a period of six years practicing public relations, it was the first time that I noticed that the information provided passed into a thin thread of filtering.

Furthermore, media workers have a kind of skepticism regarding the information forwarded by the justice institutions. Sonila Mesaraja a journalist of “Standard”, newspaper, who covers reporting of the justice system for more than 5 years, notes that “the institution gives its truth, as it desires to be reported the news. It is the journalist who explores beyond that statement.”¹¹ Huton recalls that “lack of trust leads to decay of the communication”. According to the arguments listed in the paper “Risks of manipulation”, inter alia states:

¹⁰ Eduard Bernays, *The Engineering of Consent*, 1927, e-book, available at <http://classes.design.ucla.edu>

¹¹ Personal interview

“It is possible that leaders become schizophrenic- say lies to journalists and providing to other parties facts; this is unjustified and ineffective. Audiences communicate with each other and the information is filtered from one group to another. With the internet it is more than true. So there is a tendency to manipulate all groups.”¹²

A growing tendency on perceptions of judicial institutions as bodies that conceal information or show half-truths it comes also as a result of their typology. Characterized as closed and half open institutions, in particular prosecution office and prison system, because of investigative procedures on which the main information “could not become public due to the violation of investigations” and non publishing of some data in the prisons that “due to violation of security”, have been considered as ready to serve responses, which have reduced the communication with the public along with media and have spurred the creation of negative perceptions. Journalists have their sources to obtain information and in some cases share and verify the information with each other. As a result, they may detect the accurate information against the manipulative one.

Herman and Chomsky propose an alternative approach to the debate, including this discussion the mass media and institutions. The main problems according to their views is that the use of manipulative and influential behavior, it is as the result of the globalization of mass media. In a generalist perspective it is assumed that media is the ideal place in which the mass society debates and at the same time practitioners of public relations are helped to hear the voices of the citizens and their opposition.¹³ On the other hand McNair proposes to estimate the opposite side of the medal. The practice of “spin doctors”, has increased the professionalism of journalists in analyzing information and data transmitted as well as the amount of political communication in mass circulation.”¹⁴

¹² James L. Horton, “The Dangers of Spin”, 2009, pg. 2-3, available at online http://www.online.pr.com/Holding/The_Dangers_of_Spin.pdf

¹³ Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, New York, Pantheon, 1988, fq. xi

¹⁴ Brian McNair, “Pressure group politics and the oxygen of publicity”. *An introduction to political communication*, London, Routledge, 1995, fq. 56

Studies on the Albanian reality and professionalism of reporters indicate “that in Albania journalistic news still makes little resistance to the PR news”. A monthly monitoring of 8 print media conducted by the students of the Public Relations profile in the Department of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tirana, show data that require serious reflection on the situation of the media in the country and influence of the public relations expert in the news. According to the results, 47% of the news are being sponsored by the public relations offices; 33% of news, the journalist is hidden behind the public relations office and 20% of the news are copy and paste materials.¹⁵ From the results obtained it can be seen that public relations tend to influence the news and “manipulate” the media to reflect the news as to their institutional approach. Impact on the news, fragmentation, the portrayal of information and journalists' behaviors, pave the way and open the debate about message management influenced by public relations. The problem becomes even more serious when the media systematically disseminate information of public relations office without prior verifying them.

Findings

a. Public relations experts in the justice system, may have intended influence on information, but at the same time they are aware about other group's interest and mostly fear the intimidation of reputation and institutional image. Moloney points out that although public relations efforts to maintain dominance through two levels, mass media- to indoctrinate ideas, values and private governmental lobbying- for the preservation of the image as bodies that draft policies for the benefit of the society, “the facts can be forwarded only

¹⁵ Found in the article: “Nga Journalism në Churnalism - Mbi gazetarinë e Marrëdhënieve me Publikun”, nga Eva Londo, in <http://al.ejo-online.eu/715/marredheniet-publike/nga-journalism-ne-churnalism-mbi-gazetarine-e-marredhenieve-me-publikun>

after successfully passed the public competitive challenges with other messages.”¹⁶

b. The dominance of the public information sources and merging the borders of information, introduces new approaches that implicate the communication theory. Social media appear as a catalyst and promoter of political correctness, but also as a mechanism of the general public to express their truth or frustration against decisions or government policies. The ordinary citizens in public, may expose the falsity of the information or unkept promises. The decision of the Court of Serious Crimes on Xhuvani case, besides other aspects, has been perceived as a manipulation of public opinion for the reform independence and impartiality of the judiciary.¹⁷

c. The development of communication technology, telecommunications, the multiplication of networks via the Internet, creation of a myriad of new media, which resulted in interaction and multimedia language, apart from the transformation of the traditional media and the journalist profession,¹⁸ influenced the positioning of public relations. Bennett and Iyengar explain that technological impetus, not only led to the multiplication of channels of information, but also in the communication process. For these scholars, “the most

¹⁶ Kevin Moloney, *Rethinking public relations*, 2nd edition. Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2006, pg. 39

¹⁷ Online Tema Journal “Konstandin Xhuvani sentenced to 35 years imprisonment. He admits that he was drugged when he killed four people.” Posted on 10 March 2015. In this article were made 13 comments. Most commentators expressed disappointment about the decision of the court and the dispensation of justice.

Panorama Online “Killed four people escaped the life imprisonment. The court sentenced to 35 years of imprisonment”. Posted on 10 March 2015. In this article were made 41 comments. Most commentators emphasizes political intervention to compromise the decision.

Online Shqiptare.Com Journal. Online “Xhuvani eludes the life imprisonment. He receives and abbreviated judgment for 4 murders”. Posted on 29 January 2015. In this article were made 13 comments. Most commentators expressed indignation at the decision taken.

Dita Online “Kostandin Xhuvani sentenced to 35 years in prison”. Posted on 10 March 2015. In this article were made 23 comments. In comments noted disappointment about justice.

¹⁸ Francis Balle, *Mediat dhe Shoqëritë*, Botimi i 15-të, Papirus 2011, pg. 165-199

obvious change involves the holder of the information, or the authoritative filtering of public information.”¹⁹ However, Bennett cautions and explains that “one of the challenges of traditional communication involves merging the boundaries between information received from the public and journalism.”²⁰

Conclusions

a. Strengthening of the public as a result of technological development and the Internet, as well as transforming themselves to a communicator of facts, evidences, data, but also as a source of information, it has reduced effectiveness and at the same time has served to reflect on the practice of “spin doctors” in justice institutions, but even wider in the public administration. Confrontation of arguments, promises and policies, doe not only happens on television screens, but dominates in social networks. Information which originates from public relations offices, and are distributed to traditional media, are being argued in social media and are confronted with the public opinion. Now, none of the information produced and cannot be “chewed” so easily. As a former journalist Dennis Atkins tells, actually manager of media in a private company, “ the application of spin is also subtle work, just ask the spin bowler in cricket or the pitcher in baseball. Ideas of dip, drift, turn and bounce are central to the craft of spin whether you are working with a ball or with words.”²¹

b. It must be clarified that credibility remains the “Achilles heel” of public relations in the justice system. As Kallison explains, the

¹⁹ W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyenger, “A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication”. *Journal of Communication* 2008, fq. 58.

²⁰ W. Lance Bennett “Changing Societies, Changing Media Systems: Challenges for Communication Theory, Research and Education”, Center for Communication & Civic Engagement, University of Washington, Seattle, USA, Working Paper 2013-1, pg. 12

²¹ Cited at Stephen Stockwell “The spin doctors: Government media advisers”, pg. 3. Available at <http://www98.griffith.edu.au>. Found on 11.03.2015.

recipient of the message judge and weighing the credibility of the message communicator.²² Even the study of the American Association of Public Relations shows that the greatest challenge of this profession is credibility, at a time when relations with journalists are perishable and sometimes unpredictable.

c. Seeing from a retrospective sight, it is evident that issues of ethics, professional and institutional integrity can be considered the axis of the challenges of justice institutions in communicating with the public and relations with it. In response to existing problems, and increasing public confidence, the Albanian Parliament by Decision no. 96/2014 created the special commission "On the reform of the justice system," whose main subject includes the analysis of the current situation of the organization and functioning of the justice system and proposing concrete measures to reform the system, aiming at improving the services and increased transparency to the public. The challenge remains open.

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