

Spin doctoring: before and after web 2.0

The effects of social networks on a complex job

We live in a society increasingly dominated by media, where information can reach people in every place and in every moment. Even politics cannot escape this phenomenon: sociologists describe it as the mediatization of the political communication. The modern era is pushing leaders into a new dimension in which the form of the message is more crucial than its content. That is the reason why spin doctors have an important role in politics nowadays. Their job deals with the ability to manipulate the information of the media, in order to guarantee the consensus to the politician. If we want to better understand when spin doctors were born, we have to think about what we mean with this term. In USA and in the United Kingdom the spin doctor is used to be thought as the generic political consultant, because in these countries this figure is completely institutionalized and provided with full powers. If we consider these experts as the Anglo-Saxon tendency imposes, the date of birth coincides with the period between the Great War and the Second World War. In that period in fact mass media started to lead public opinion and politics realized that it was necessary to control the press to gain votes. Leaders began to collaborate with communication experts during the electoral campaigns, providing spots on the newspapers and on the radio. Only in 1950 we can find the first campaign managers, who looked after all the electoral process: Ted Bates, Joe Napolitan and Edward Louis Bernays. The meaning of spin doctor is a bit different in Europe, where this job has not a remarkable tradition. European leaders tend to separate the generic consultant, who is supposed to be the strategist and the spin doctor, who is the image consultant. In this dimension the first spin doctoring activity started in 1980, during the political success of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. These politicians transferred their conservative line to the media management, re-inverting the relationship between politics and the means of communication. Both the definitions are referred to a figure that has always been considered in a negative way by the people. The first journalists that denounced the presence of these confidential advisers, called them “the hidden persuaders” (Packard 1989). The idea of fake news sellers is the most confirmed opinion about spin doctors today and it justifies even the skepticism of some politicians. The bad consideration is probably a consequence of the ignorance about the features of this job.

The mediatization in politics became clear with the success of television, between the 50's and the 60's. Leaders needed to plan a brand-new strategy based on their public appearance, because TV programs asked especially for the image they provided: the content was collateral in front of the camera. Since the famous presidential debate in which Kennedy defeated Nixon in 1960, the politicians have been invading all the television shows, creating the so-called "permanent campaign". The uninterrupted presence aims to the control of the medium, that means an elevate power of legitimacy. Television however is a potential danger for the politicians because it includes some innovations. First of all it excludes the elements that separated voters and leaders, such as the party, so the control over the electors and their behavior cannot consist anymore in the daily activity of the militants. Moreover television reduces the distance between the politicians and the eyes of people: every detail and every error can be immediately identified. Even the leadership is influenced by the media immersion that causes two main circumstances: the spectatorization and the personalization. The first phenomenon is driven by both media and leaders: the first ones choose a dramatic style to stimulate the audience and the second ones follow the trend using an emotional rhetoric to engage people. The same actors are responsible for the growth of the personalization in politics: newspapers and TV shows concentrate the information on the most relevant personalities in order to make the comprehension simpler and leaders provide the classic image of the celebrity, well-known and unattainable. In this context the role of the spin doctors is clearly fundamental because they can help the politician in their communication approach. Their competences can be various and we generally divided them according to their specific work: strategists, specialists and vendors. The first ones plan the campaign coordinating all the staff work. The second ones deal with polls, advertising, speech writing and all the services that elections need. The vendors sell to the communication team software, elector list for the direct mailing, items for the opposite research. The political competition imposes market oriented strategies so spin doctors are often marketing experts: this job requires the ability of understanding the desires of people in order to build an effective message. In spite of this trend, today political consultants usually have also a journalistic background that helps them to handle the relationship with the media. Their curriculum vitae should demonstrate political experiences too: working in politics means also understanding its rhythms and its rituals. Taken for granted the sociological and mass media studies, a good spin doctor has to develop some inner skills to succeed in his activity. First of all he has to be endowed with the

leader spirit, since he is the head of a numerous team which can experience bad and stressing moments. Moreover, the rules of the globalized market want the spin doctor to be ready for foreign experiences: so the ability to adapt and a thorough knowledge of other languages are essential. The activities of these consultants can be divided in three different moments: understanding, setting and operating. In the first phase they try to describe the surrounding context in the best way possible, so they provide some sectorial investigations. The first step consists of candidate researches, so all the contenders are scanned in order to find weaknesses and skills, even considering the human and economic capital of each ones. Then spin doctors start the voter research, in which they can find information about the vote intention and the general mood of people. The third step is the issue and media research: the politicians have to match their purposes with the opinions of the electorate and with the topics spread by the press. In this phase the polls are the primary tool for spin doctors, because they allow the candidate to reach accurate information fast. We can recognize three different ways to take advantage of polling: fact-finding use, prevising use and tactical use. The most relevant use is certainly the tactical one, because it deals with a strategic research that hides negative results and glorifies positive data. The difference between quantitative (benchmarking research) and qualitative polls (interviews, focus groups, dial meter analysis) is a second term of classification. The third method to order these researches consists of the separation between external and inner polls. The last ones are all the studies included in the swot analysis, a systematic technique to list values and defects of the client. In the setting phase the candidate has to select his approach to the political scenario: he decides to choose an attitude similar or opposing compared with the style of his predecessor. Leaders then end the preliminary decisions with the style settings: they adopt a campaign mode based on the image or on the contents of his political purposes. In the so-called targeting moment, spin doctors analyze the data of the previous polls to define the suitable audience for their campaign. They split the public in three groups: the supporters, the uncertain voters and the opponent voters. The main strategy consists of strengthening the ideas of the fans and persuading the hesitant people, in order to reach the number of votes that is necessary to win the elections (for the opponent voters the consultants do not waste too much energy). After targeting the audience, spin doctors work on the message construction which has to answer at least three questions: "why does the candidate present his candidacy?" (rationale), "why should people vote for him?" (theme) and "What does the candidate want to do after being

elected?" (issues). Choosing a positive or negative message is the last step of the strategy: the leader bases his speech on purposing changes or on discrediting the work of his opponents. In the operative time spin doctors use their communication skills to build interactions suitable for every media, but they obviously concentrate their action on television. The most important instruments of consensus on video are the spots and the debates. The spots are similar to the advertising interruptions and they can identify the candidate, support an idea or attack the positions of the opponents about an issue. Leaders often take advantage of testimonials, TV stars who subscribe a political view to engage the electorate and to create affection. The debates are a delicate part of the campaign: every word and every facial expression can sanction the defeat or the victory of a candidate, so politicians work on every dialogue with the speechwriters and image consultants. The main activity of spin doctors in this section of the campaign is the manipulation of the information. They try to build strategic news, in order to distract public opinion from events which can ruin the political reputation of the leader. They manage to control the media giving them the more amount of information they can, in a way that prevent a deeper press investigation. To prove the benefits of their work, spin doctors resort again to polling (tracking and quick response research).

For at least five or six years, the last technological developments of the internet have been introducing new media and new challenges in the political arena. Social networks in particular are changing the relationship between people and politicians, reducing the intermediations in their communication. The interaction today is limitless, in terms of time and space: all the net surfers can share contents everywhere and in every moment of the day. The web can be seen as a democratizing instrument but it can deceive the users giving the illusion of an unfiltered mean of communication. Some experts argue that the internet conveys processes of re-intermediation: if we analyze the dynamics of the virtual phenomenon we can trace the same features of offline politics. The militants for example shift from the party sections to the web pages in a passive way, without modifying their behavior and even the hesitant voters maintain their attitude on Twitter or Facebook. The so-called emotional public, that establishes with the net the first approach to politics, represents the only exception to this trend. Political leadership appears really different in the web 2.0 era: the new participation of people generates at least three types of virtual leaders. The "ruler" leader takes advantage of the web to gain the consensus he needs, often using a populist and anti-political rhetoric. The

“interpreter” leader already avails himself of electoral support and he wants the web to be his personal laboratory, in which he can test new strategies. The “discussing” leader, set his web spaces in order to create a true debate arena. Spin doctors role is being totally shaken up by the web 2.0 success, because it produces relevant transformations in the political communication. First of all the web was born as a narrowcast system, so it includes all the unofficial opinions, strongly lined up against the traditional information. Spin doctors should escape from these circuits, in order to maintain the control over the media flow. Second of all the production of information can be obstructed by the linkability of the net, the great possibility of tracing the sources. Finally spin doctors have to focus on the mutual correspondence between online and offline media: political TV programs and newspapers progressively mention what happens on the social networks and vice versa. Some competences are different in the web era: the communication needs technical and specific skills. In the consultant team we find figures that start to emerge, like the web designer, the web marketing expert and the fundraiser. Even the role of the speechwriter seems to become obsolete, and it is being gradually replaced by the more specific figure of the ghostwriter, a person who substitutes the leader in every virtual texting activity. Referring to web politics, we can propose again the systematic division of his work: understanding, setting and operating. The new spin doctor is much more a researcher than a strategist, he only has to listen to the different voices of the audience to provide good plans of communication. The poll services are becoming useless in a context in which Twitter or Facebook can report the chart of “trend topics”, even though they maintain a margin of error linked to the lacking diffusion of the internet access in some countries. In the setting phase the consultants opt for microtargeting tactics, in order to capture the attention of the public with multiple and personalized messages. We are in a climate oriented perspective that substitutes the market oriented one: spin doctor understand that it’s simpler to win the election influencing all the public opinion tendencies and not only giving people what they want (the logic of the market oriented strategies). The operative moment deals with particular techniques evolving from offline to online era. On the social networks testimonials become endorsers, opinion leaders who contribute to increase the media status of the leader. Through the use of Twitter and Facebook the politicians can trigger effective strategies of storytelling, fundraising and about the creation of pseudo-events. The last ones are fake facts that spin doctors invent to involve and mobilize the audience: their propagation is clearly easier by the net. Matteo Renzi, the

mayor of Florence, is one of the most skilled online politicians in Italy. Thanks to the help of a fundraiser, Marco Carrai, and a spin doctor, Giorgio Gori, he succeeded in gaining a relevant internet success. He provided a smart social system to collect money for his campaign, achieving the approval of important financiers, such as Davide Serra. Moreover he worked on an informal writing style in his web posts, making his internet pages a sort of virtual open diary. Every declaration is cleverly full of emotional element, like the so-called "life stories", the references to emblematic cases of the ordinary reality.