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ARE WE TALKING ABOUT POLITICAL REALITY,
MEDIA REALITY OR THE REAL REALITY?



SPIN IN POLITICS

The Origin, Structure and Effects of Spin

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the structure of spin and its austere presence in politics, as well as in the media. The origin of spin and its definition are thoroughly laid out in order to come closer to comprehending what it entails, who are the ones that make use of spin, what the motivations are for its usage, what its complications may be in a democratic society and how spin should be handled. The focus is predominantly put on political communication in American society, however, information that originates from other countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia is also used to clarify spin and its accompanying characteristics. With the help of qualitative research, data has been gathered from numerous books, academic sources, governmental websites, news articles, videos, podcasts, opinionated articles and more. Ultimately, the use of spin as a form of favourable political communication with the public presents its democratic and undemocratic features, alongside of its impact on society.

Keywords: *Spin, Spin doctors, Politics, Media, Publicity Management, Democracy, Independent Journalism, Credibility, Accountability, Transparency*

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Introduction

The presidency of Donald Trump Jr. in the United States has been covered in ambiguities with regards to its appreciation of the truth since the run up and beginning of the presidential elections in 2016. One may recall the initial lies about the inaugural photographs of the audience compared to President Obama's inauguration, followed up by attempts to 'spin' the truth in their favour with "alternative facts" (Trotta). From the very start, Donald Trump and his appointees have shown to make little light of factual evidence, as well as presenting it in such a way that it benefits them – think of the President's unsubstantiated claims that federal workers supported his government shutdown in 2018 (Restuccia and Cook). Presenting different truths or 'spin' in politics is defined as "the attempt to control or influence communication in order to deliver one's preferred message" and is thus different from telling blatant, deceitful lies or simple objective facts (Braun and Rogers). 'Spin' is seen as a form of propaganda in which deceptive methods are used to persuade others and manipulate truths for various reasons. In politics it is usually typified by use of "exaggeration, euphemisms, inaccuracies, half-truths and emotional appeals" (Nordquist). Naturally this remarkable behaviour by the President and his administration attracts a lot of attention from news media outlets and now these have come under intense scrutiny too for making news reports that are presumably biased or allegedly fake. The scrutiny is a result of the constant attacks by Trump on the media by calling them "the enemy of the people", the spreaders of "fake news" and "the liberal elite establishment" (Tisdall).

The spinning of facts is not a phenomenon that began since Donald Trump's inauguration as there have been more presidents in the past that told different facts or lies to work in their advantage, but it has significantly become more obvious thanks to him. The spinning or withholding of facts is not always inherently wrong as in some cases it is done for matters of national security for example (although significantly magnified, Trump's border "crisis" is a serious matter), but on some occasions the lines of legality and morality are crossed (Harwood). To clarify, spinning facts is not the same as lying. The Cambridge Dictionary describes a lie as "saying or writing something that you know is not true in order to deceive someone" (Cambridge Dictionary). With spinning, the truth can be altered so much

that the actual truth becomes so obscured to the point where the public faces “alternative facts” – a theory that presents alternative and more widely accepted facts (Morrissey, Alternative facts do exist: beliefs, lies and politics).

What is even more striking is the fact that people in power can easily get away with it, without facing real repercussions. This in turn raises the question of when credibility should go hand in hand with accountability (The Irish Times). For instance, when the President or any other politician tells something non-factual to mislead the public so that it suits his agenda, should he be held accountable for misleading the public? People put their trust in politicians and expect them to do the right thing, but when a politician is not credible and not held accountable for his actions, what is to be done then?

This thesis investigates what the spinning of facts does to the credibility and accountability of political actors and the media. In order to reach a conclusion, the following questions will be asked; where does ‘spin’ find its origins, who are the ones that make use of it, and what are the implications of its use. As these questions will be investigated, the focus of the research is mainly put on the United States as this is the country that provides most of the sources, it is an ongoing subject there, and its political and media structure allow thorough analysis, however, additional sources from other countries are also used. Aside from its origins, the thesis furthermore focuses on the moment ‘spin’ was “visibly revived” once more, and that moment took place during Donald Trump Jr.’s inauguration in 2016 and is still ongoing.

Methodology

In order to research the phenomenon of ‘spin’ and its development throughout the years, the use of spin and the consequences of its usage in politics and the media, qualitative exploratory research has been used. This method was chosen as spin has become more detectable thanks to crucial independent analysis and public scrutiny, and so the amount of (online) sources that examine spin has expanded. By conducting desk research and reviewing numerous different (literary) sources such as (e)books, academic literature in the form of essays, journals and studies, governmental websites, a multitude of news articles, YouTube videos, podcasts and interviews, opinionated blogs and discussion papers ranging from 1997 up until 2019, data has been gathered to outline all of the elements that make up the structure of spin.

Throughout the text there is a strong American presence as a lot of information is provided by American sources, however, this thesis does not put its primary focus solely on the U.S.A. as other countries like Australia and the United Kingdom also provide sufficient and additional information that enable a wider perspective. The reason for not interviewing knowledgeable individuals is mainly due to the fact that this is a cross-cultural subject of which many relevant sources are currently available, aside from having travel expenditures and booking costs of guests exceed the income of the student author. The sources within this document have been analysed carefully, checked for discrepancies and counter arguments have been presented to ensure the most attainable form of objectivity. Spin has been around for an extended period of time, however, due to (f)actors such as President Donald Trump among others, spin has come to be more visible to the public in a democracy thanks to critical journalism. Regardless of whether or not the use of spin outlines its effects on credibility and accountability in its entirety for those who use it, this thesis contributes to the understanding of spin, the effects that it has and the consequences that coincide with it.

Chapter one presents the necessary information to understand the very definition of spin from the moment it was first “established” in the United States of America, up until the most noticeable, high profile uses of spin in politics and the media in more recent years. This chapter also provides three subchapters that firstly outline the development of spin in politics in the last few years. Secondly the relationship between spin and the media is defined as these are inseparably connected, as well as touching on the public’s sentiment towards the usage of spin. And lastly is the dissection of spin methods and techniques that are commonly used in

politics and the media to get across a certain favourable message or stream of information that is meant to manipulate public opinion.

Chapter two addresses the negative and positive effects that spin and its users have, as well as acknowledging the fact that spin has become an embedded phenomenon in a democratic society that requires constant management to have it be effective. Spin has influenced politics in such a way that the political environment seems to have become a business that prioritizes self-interest above a collective interest of the public. Where it outlines the negative developments, it also lays out the positive developments and possible need for spin to create awareness on a wide range of subjects.

Chapter three examines the extent to which the credibility of those who use spin is affected and how the public perceives that, as well as the fact of researching a certain level of legal and moral accountability that may apply to the users of spin. It is worth considering that this subject seems to have become more prominent and discussable in the last years and even though its usage goes back a decent amount of time, there is a limited amount of information available with regards to a legal framework that properly confronts spin if at all because of its peculiarity.

Chapter 1: Origin of 'spin'

Politicians, news anchors and other influential actors have used certain rhetoric to promote their political, economic and social ideas for years (Cooper). This “selling of ideas” has been an important aspect of governance and has been criticized since the time of ancient Greece. Individuals in the field of philosophy have objected to the notion of ‘rhetoric’ the most back then as philosophers such as Plato saw it as “smooth-tongued oration that would inflame passions and distort the truth”. He objected to it as it was constructed to evoke feelings and impose certain convictions regardless of whether or not it was true (Roell).

Fast forward to the early 20th century, the phenomenon of ‘spin’ was supposedly established when Teddy Roosevelt stepped into the presidential office from 1901 to 1909 and he made use of public opinion, the media and leaks in politics to present his views (Greenberg, How Teddy Roosevelt Invented Spin). ‘Political spin’ in this case, is the attempt to deliberately influence the (political) narrative in such a way that it conveys a biased message one prefers to a targeted audience (Braun and Rogers). In its essence a political spin is manipulative, structured and calculated, and in politics spin is often associated with press conferences given by the government where the press secretary is tasked with communicating a constructed political message. As the term ‘spin’ is used, one must think of the term ‘public relations’ (PR) as well. It is argued that Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays were the founding fathers of modern public relations (nathanedgedmu). It was Lee who began developing PR predominantly for businessmen to make them more communicative about their undertakings. By publicizing press releases and providing factual information, as well as listening to the press and the public (which was uncommon back then) he aimed to supply important, detailed news to the public rather than advertisements. Edward Bernays, related to Sigmund Freud, had a different approach to PR as he focused more on mass psychology and how to use corporate and political persuasion. His take on PR was of a more propagandic nature and meant to suppress democracy (Miller and Dinan). The difference between PR and propaganda is that PR makes use of all the facts and displays them as positive as possible for all parties. The information is factual and has not been altered. Propaganda however does twist the information in its favour and there is little to no regard for the public that will receive it (Murphy). The exact moment that ‘spin’ and ‘public relations’ embraced their true and full meaning cannot be easily pinpointed, as many scholars and historians believe there are multiple time periods and individuals who have built further upon planned and strategical

communication campaigns, yet one can consider Teddy Roosevelt one of the key actors in this development (Lamme and Russell).

Other presidents did give speeches and cared about the images they conveyed to the public as well, but Roosevelt believed that it was pivotal for a president to be active and in order to be active he needed to mobilize the public and get them on his side (Purdy). Teddy Roosevelt drastically transformed the presidency from a “mere executive in office” to a “steward of the people” that should take whatever action is necessary to ensure the public good, unless it is explicitly prohibited by law or the Constitution (The White House). He took it upon himself to actively and publicly meet the needs of the nation and its people by introducing reforms in the railroad, food and drug industries among other things (United States History). These reforms were needed because at the time Congress was predominantly occupied by men with high profile careers (law firms, banking, railroad industry and so on) who only acted in their own interests rather than the people’s interest, and so public support for reform increased (History, Art & Archives: United States House of Representatives). The President believed that it was the government’s duty to act as the nation’s mediator to settle differences between opposing economic forces, and to guarantee justice for all. Additionally, Roosevelt laid the groundwork for future presidents to tour the country in order to promote their favoured legislation, as well as creating positive relations with the press. He did this by hosting informal press conferences, assigning a pressroom where journalists could gather, hiring government press officers and staging publicity stunts. As a result of his efforts in publicity work and the management of public opinion, Roosevelt was the first to actively introduce the beginning of spin. It had now become an apparatus of persuasion that future president would have at their disposal as well.

Thanks to his example, future presidents would engage themselves into public matters more often. Roosevelt did not only use his presidential powers to make reforms, but as was mentioned before, he also used his powers and consciousness to connect with the people. By holding speeches and maintaining relations with the press, he put major national problems on the political agenda and was subsequently able to shape his image and convey his messages in ways that he envisioned.

1.1 The development of 'spin' in politics

In the White House administrations that followed, the role of spin grew. Each President had his own way of influencing the culture of persuasion, but in turn this raised the question of whether or not presidents were becoming too familiar with manipulating public opinion. There were even those who thought that the advertising business threatened politics and democracy. David Greenberg argues in his book *Republic of Spin* that facts will ultimately outweigh spin. He states that even good publicity management cannot save a poor administration and facts will eventually catch up with the politician. However, spin has become a part of politics as it is a form of storytelling and each side is free to share its views. "We need to think of it as argument, as advocacy, as the way politicians put the best slant on their argument" (Greenberg, Political Spin).

Although Greenberg is familiar with spin in politics, he did not account for someone like Donald Trump's rise to the stage. Since Donald Trump stepped into the White House, spin in politics has become more recognizable and facts seem to have become subjected to one's own interpretation. This own interpretation of facts unfortunately opens the doors for alternative facts that politicians are more willing to accept if it aligns more with their vision. On top of that, it creates a tempting opening for people to participate in and facilitate the spread of outright lies. The Collins Dictionary describes a lie as "A lie is something that someone says or writes which they know is untrue" (Collins Dictionaries). Often lies are used to subtly disguise and obscure the truth, but sometimes those lies are not enough to completely cover the truth when there is obviously enough evidence to prove otherwise (Morrissey, Alternative facts do exist: beliefs, lies and politics). One clear example of such lies backfiring when talking about the subject of spin in politics is Donald Trump Jr.'s inauguration photographs of 2016. It was claimed that Donald Trump's presidential inauguration was the largest in history, despite the fact that there was the abundant availability of pictures, video recordings and statistics. A rather childish back and forth about what was real and what was fake ensued, and Kellyanne Conway – Trump's advisor and former campaign manager – even defended the administration's statement by saying that "alternative facts" were given. The term "alternative facts" was used to present other facts that carry a more appealing and convenient meaning (Collins English Dictionary). Naturally, the media was all over this extraordinary statement like bees attracted to honey, and many people were stunned by disbelief that this remark was even possible and acceptable in politics while there is plenty of evidence.

Facts are a sure thing, because a fact is known and substantial information has been provided to prove something wrong or right. For instance, the world is round and gravity exists. These are facts that have been scientifically proven and there is enough evidence and data to substantiate these “scientific propositions”. However, there are also “political propositions” that are designed in such a way to appeal to the emotions and beliefs of individuals, and can thus not be subjected to the same scrutiny as scientific propositions. Whereas scientific propositions are backed up with data, political propositions are moreover supported by personal convictions. In that regard, beliefs and facts differ because the individual decides which one outweighs the other. Where some consider feelings to be substantial for evidence, they are excluded from any scientific dialogue with thorough substance. For many people that have the ability to think and relate rationally, this train of thought of having personal convictions outweigh definite facts is often rejected by them because of the very reason that it lacks the proper rationale, nevertheless, this line of thinking does exist and influences the way people make decisions. So in that sense beliefs of an individual can supersede any collected evidence because it is more personal, closer to their own “truth”, and is not subjected to a scientific approach. Merely mentioning facts by providing legitimate evidence is thus no longer sufficient as it is hard to persuade someone to alter their own convictions and thinking process.

The reason why people reject the original truth and adopt their own may be because it is more relatable as we experience that moment directly and give it a meaning that comforts us. For instance, we know of the scientific evolution theory, yet we doubt it because we do not experience it directly and noticeably. On the other hand, Lochlan Morrissey says that many people believe that the scientific theory of germs is in fact correct and indisputable, even though germs are in itself not directly observable. The theory of germs makes sense to people because it explains how diseases come into existence and spread, yet both are not directly visible to the naked eye, only the physical evidence that is associated with an illness is visible (e.g. blood and bile). One could argue that this is a rather selective way of thinking, but it is what many people feel more comfortable with.

1.2 The relationship between 'spin' and the media

Now that the origin of spin in politics has been briefly elaborated on and a light has been shed on those who may use it, it is also noteworthy to mention the role the media has played in spin. As Teddy Roosevelt had grown experienced with publicity management and shaping his own image by maintaining good relations with the press, the presence and the role of the press grew along with it.

While publicity management was expanded by future presidents, the press eventually recognized how much the presidents wanted to control the narrative that would enable them to get out their desired message (Greenberg, Political Spin). It eventually came to the point where it was asked what the role of the press actually entailed. Is the press there to attempt to uncover or undo a politician's spin? Or does the press act as a mouthpiece of spin? Those in the media thought it was their job to contextualize and unspin whatever the president brought out in public. However, the media is heavily subjected to the opinion of the people. If people are supportive of the president we want the press to lay off a bit and take it easy, but if the president has only little support among the public, we expect the press to be critical and analytical.

As the use of publicity management and spin grew, so did the role of the media. Particularly in the years that followed Roosevelt's presidency, spin and the media became more modernized. Nowadays there are public relations officers, consultants, lobbyists, television advisors, pollsters and many more working behind the scenes to make sure a message is delivered in the best way possible. The structuration and staging of speeches and publicity stunts grew ever more important because every president saw the importance of looking as good as possible, while delivering a message in the best way possible. Presentability and relatability are the things that mattered the most to them for it allowed them to sway the public in a certain direction more easily. Public relations had become an essential industry that at first had not existed before, at least not on this scale. Slogans were used, publicity stunts were concocted and throughout the 1920s and 1930s 'spin-doctors' gradually became more involved in politics. The spin-doctors are the ones in charge of giving information to the public in a way so that it benefits a politician or organization (Longman). The development of the electronic television in 1927 was one of the most pivotal and technological gamechangers as it gave presidents more opportunities to share and be heard on various broadcasting channels (Encyclopedia of Communication and Information). Now during the 21st century, not only are television and radio channels used, but social media

networks such as Twitter and Facebook play a prominent role in reaching out to the public as well.

Throughout the years methods and technologies have changed, but they are not definitive in the sense that the public is easily persuaded to believe a president on his words. Regardless of how authentic and “off-script” a president claims to be, there are always spin-doctors involved and many people have come to realize that. The glorification of stories and the manipulation of the press have not gone unnoticed. According to the second chapter called *Spin doctors, citizens and democracy* from Stephen Stockwell’s book *Government Communication in Australia* (2007), people have learned to criticize appearances, to distinguish the real from that what was staged, to analyse what was worth listening to, and also to provide counter narratives. Many people claim they want to get away from the spin-doctors because it is the authenticity that many appreciate and prefer, however, people seem to respond better to the efforts of spin doctors as these often have the effect of affirming people’s similar ideological views. Thus in spite of the fact that a politician’s words may be manufactured, having someone’s views acknowledged by a person of influence is what the public finds appealing.

1.3 The innerworkings of ‘spin’

Thus far the essence of spin has been laid out in the sense that Theodore Roosevelt was the one who actively started to manage publicity and public opinion, as well as the relationship that spin has with politics and the media. But the very core of spin has yet to be discussed. According to Ivor Gaber, a professor of Political Journalism at Goldsmiths, University of London, there are several “overt” and “covert” spin tactics the press secretaries use to influence and manipulate the public (Fisher). When talking about “overt tactics”, one refers to writing press releases, giving speeches, creating public events and organizing public events. When one talks about “covert tactics”, there are several techniques that are used to manage information. These secondary tactics are what people have come to identify as sly trickery and distinctive to spin. A wide range of research has enabled people to point out the many tactics that are used to control the output of news reports, and so each will be briefly addressed.

A rather common form of controlling the media is when politicians or their staff members provide the press with strategic leaks in exchange for not seeking comments from the opposite side. One could see this as rewarding a journalist with a selling top story. But

aside from rewarding a journalist, it is also prevalent to punish one. This can be done by “spraying” or “freezing” journalists that have published negative news reports. Spraying is essentially bullying or intimidating journalists for reporting something that is not in your favour, while freezing is denying someone any further access to reporting news. A great and fairly recent example was President Donald Trump Jr.’s attack on CNN’s political reporter Jim Acosta (Merrick). As Jim Acosta asked the President several critical questions regarding his campaign and immigration and border policies during a press conference, the President’s response was to bully and label him as a “rude, terrible person” (spraying) because Acosta’s questions were not to his liking. Accordingly Acosta’s press pass was temporarily revoked (freezing) and press secretary Sarah Sanders brazenly dared to insinuate that Acosta had assaulted the female intern that attempted to retrieve his microphone, even though there is plenty of evidence to debunk that. The far-right media outlet called “Infowars” shamelessly reposted a doctored video of said incident that was supposed to highlight Acosta’s assault on the intern (Inside Edition). Sarah Sanders even went as far as saying “We will never tolerate a reporter placing his hands on a young woman just trying to do her job...” in order to discredit him as a journalist and in an attempt to have the video work in their advantage. The documented incident sparked an outrage amongst various media outlets as the White House Administration showed a blatant disregard for critical journalists.

Other manners in which the narrative is often controlled by politicians are for example via “pivoting”, in which a politician tries to move away from a difficult matter to a more favourable one. By a strategy called “vomiting”, one repeats something so often that the public is tempted to start believing it. A great and controversial example of “vomiting” may be the UKIP’s (United Kingdom’s Independence Party) Eurosceptic former party leader Nigel Farage and his take on the Brexit and the NHS (National Health Service) in 2016. As he campaigned for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union he frequently stated that if the country would leave the union, £350 million a week would be spent on the NHS and not the EU (McCann). Many UKIP supporters believed his statements as he continuously guaranteed this campaign promise, however, only an hour or so after the Leave vote had been confirmed he rescinded his promise. It left many opposers and supporters filled with anger as the “Leave” side had been misinformed and deceived (Farand). “Playing a dead bat” entails refusing to respond to a question or remark from the media in an attempt to kill the story. Particularly “pivoting” and “playing a dead bat” are extremely obvious when looking at a video published by CNN with Anderson Cooper as host called *Watch a master class on*

political doublespeak (CNN). Then-governor of Florida Rick Scott can be heard applying some of the tactics during a campaign round that have been discussed previously. In Florida it is apparently illegal for public employees to be a part of campaign events while they are on duty. A complaint was filed with the state and although this is an offense, it is not an offense that would require and constitute serious legal consequences on the same level a political scandal would. Then-governor Rick Scott was asked the simple question of whether or not he knew that the public employees were on duty and if they should be disciplined (meaning that he should or would have known it was an offense, yet he requested their presence anyway). It is the manner in which the then-governor handled a simple question by saying a lot of things without ever providing a substantial answer. He expressed his pride and gratitude for the supportive police officers that were present and he states a few statistics on crime, but he never answered the questions regarding the officer's duty regulations and disciplinary consequences. The notes of the interview can be found below.

Interviewer #1: "Did you really think that all of those deputies were off-duty?"

Rick Scott: "Okay, I'm very proud that last week the police chiefs endorsed me. I'm very proud that forty sheriffs have endorsed me. I'm very proud off all the support from the law enforcement, with a 43-year low on our crime rate, so we invite them to our campaign events and I'm very appreciative of the ones who came."

Interviewer #1: "But did you think it was a problem to have on-duty law enforcement there?"

Rick Scott: "I'm very appreciative of both their support and those that come to my events."

Interviewer #2: "You didn't answer that question, should there be discipline?"

Rick Scott: "Look I'm very appreciative of everyone that comes to my events and gosh with a 43-year low on our crime rate, we should be very supportive of our law enforcement."

Interviewer #1: "Do you think it's okay for them to be there on duty?"

Rick Scott: "I'm very appreciative our police chiefs endorsed me last week [...], forty sheriffs did, we have law enforcement come to a variety of events and others, and I'm very appreciative of anybody that comes to an event and supports my race."

“Pivoting”, “vomiting” and “playing a dead bat” were about all of the tactics he used to “control” the flow of the conversation and deflect criticism. CNN’s Don Lemon even dubbed actions similar to Rick Scott’s as *The Art of Dodge* based on a scene from the 2004 movie called *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (CNN). In the movie the game of dodgeball is explained by citing the “five D’s”, namely dodge, duck, dip, dive and dodge again (Thurber). It applies to both the game and politics when politicians do not feel like answering directly for whatever reason, to the frustration of many. To the politicians it is about repetitively saying a whole bunch of contentless stuff so that critics can not pin a stance on you.

Moving on to other strategies, politicians may find themselves “taking out the garbage”. When a politician “takes out the garbage”, it is about releasing damaging information at a particular time of a major event. This is done so that the harmful information will essentially fly under the radar completely unnoticed or it will at the very least be considered less important because the event is seen as more meaningful. A precise timing is thus paramount. “Fire-breaking” is somewhat similar, however instead of waiting for a major event to happen, one stages a distraction himself to divert the attention from a different issue. That way the negative news either gets forgotten or ignored. A simple example is when a politician aims to launch a new interesting policy in order to take away the press’ attention from a negative issue. A more elaborate example can be taken from the movie *Wag the Dog* (1997) by Barry Levinson. The President of the United States is accused of sexual misconduct with a female before the elections take place and in order to deviate the attention from this scandal, a fake war is made up (Levinson). The President calls upon the help of a spin doctor and a Hollywood producer to fabricate a war for television to distract the public from his escapades. War-torn scenes are created with the help of CGI and the media is used to spread the news surrounding this war. In the end, the President is re-elected, the war was thought to be real, and the public completely forgot about his wrongdoings.

As we carry on, perhaps the most popularly used tactic since 2016 as Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as President is “dishing dirt”. Everyone and everything that has opposed, disagreed or wronged him is subjected to a barrage of insults, mockery and defamation (Lee). Whether you are an entertainer, a critical journalist, the director of an organization, a former member of his administration, a Democratic or Republican party member or even a head of state, it does not matter who you are or who you represent, once you have crossed Donald J. Trump or his administration’s interests there is no place for you to hide. Your name will literally be dragged through the dirt publicly (read: Twitter) so that your believability and

reputation will have lost value. In turn, the victims will often strike back by ridiculing the President and his followers in a similar fashion by suggesting that he is an uneducated, racist misogynist or something of the kind (Mitchelhill). It is a remark that many opposing voters have come to adopt as it negatively affects the President's reputation and credibility, and it is a clear illustration of dirt being dished out simultaneously by opposing sides.

As one can see, these are few examples of the many covert tactics that are used by political campaign advisors, social media strategists and lobbyists in order to manipulate and steer the press in a certain direction.

Chapter 2: The effects of 'spin' (in politics)

Spin in itself has become an interlinked phenomenon to politics for it has become a way to persuade people to believe a desired message. Politicians and their PR team(s) always hope to convey a message without any critical rebuttal, because it has grown to be a great method to control a story and to shape the thinking patterns of a larger audience (Sharlamanov and Jovanovski). On the other hand from a politician's point of view, spin is necessary because critical journalists will often try to discredit a politician, party or political process in order to disrupt the relationship with the public. Many members of the public are no longer oblivious to the fact that spin is used on a regular basis, however, what is important is that people recognize its use. How well-known are the effects of spin amongst the people and what are the effects of (politicians) using spin in politics and in the media?

Spin has a lot of impact on the public as it mostly carries a negative connotation and people tend to distrust politicians and the media because of that. Political journalist Michelle Grattan determines spin as "a highly professional selling of political messages which includes the maximum use and manipulation of the media." Particularly in the UK and the US, the major political parties have press officers or spin doctors that maintain relationships with the media. These 'spin doctors' are the ones responsible for bringing specific messages to the public to evoke certain feelings and reactions, and in many cases they are disliked by journalists for the fact that they manipulate information and in doing so negatively impact public perception. In addition to the former, it is also their job to manage a politician's or political party's image in public (by means of advertisements, public activities, community events, being present on online platforms and spreading information) to monitor and understand the media (in order to know what is important and what they can spin), and to strategically get the right information to the right people at the right time. Although spin is not the same as lying, it does bypass the objective truth.

2.1 The negative effects of spin

One of its effects is that it reduces people's confidence in political parties which leads to a lower turnout during elections and the delegitimization of a democracy. Many people believe that thanks to spin, politics are no longer about governing the country but more about saving one's face and career (Smith). With politicians that use several marketing techniques to spread untruths, inaccuracies, make use of scare tactics and who utter blunt threats, people often tend to believe that that is all for show, and that the politicians are desperate to stay relevant in the field of politics. To politicians, this manner of operating in politics has become more of a marketing gig and it creates a gap between them and the citizens. In the world of sales and marketing customers are often treated to certain goods and services to ensure their loyalty to the brand, but when politicians apply the same techniques to ensure the loyalty of their "customers", it comes across as if a citizen is merely an object of exploitation (My Accounting Course). To some, citizens have solely come to represent votes instead of respected citizens whose voices are given attention. It has allowed politicians to say whatever they want to attract voters without putting any true value to their words and so they slowly chip away at their own credibility. Andreas Whittam Smith, co-founder and editor of The Independent believes that this neglectful attitude does put a sincere and substantial relationship with the public under heavy pressure, and it shows that power in politics outweighs proper government. In order to prevent an ongoing cycle of spin and to take away a politician's desire to be elected repeatedly, a solution may be to introduce stricter term limits. This measure could prevent a politician from spinning his way to a seat in a public office. With a term limit installed, the desire to be re-elected could shrink as it would no longer represent a lifelong career, but a genuine civil duty with a set limit.

Secondly, spin affects the freedom of (critical) journalism. When a journalist attempts to critically interview a public figure or attends a political event, it is likely that he will encounter an event that has been delicately managed and scripted (Cushion). It lets the politicians control the narrative and this puts a strain on a journalists' independence. For instance, many political events only provide limited access and a bare minimum of in-depth coverage, if any. Therefore it is argued that journalism is often controlled by elite sources, albeit by politicians or their spokesmen (Dijk). And so the distinct barriers that divide independent journalism, publicity management and propaganda have become more obscured while simultaneously undermining democratic news. Independent journalism is an essential aspect in democracies around the world as it is supposed to act as a watchdog for citizens. Its

most important responsibility is to inform citizens of information that is factually correct and unaltered by a market-driven landscape. Because of the fact that journalism is tasked with defending a free and unaffected flow of information, governance should be reformed in such a way that systematically distorted communications cannot influence the access to information – a principle of democracy – while also ensuring transparency (Dinan and Miller). If there is no access to information or if there is no transparency, the public will miss out on important social and political processes that makeup societies (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)). Hence, free access to transparent information is essential and a fundamental right that should constantly be enforced (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)). When politicians or mega-corporate managers deliberately cut the funds for public broadcasting stations or own and control a media outlet, it gets harder to report objective and critical news as they decide what will and what will not be reported. Their priorities lie with protecting corporate interests, not with reporting unbiased, fully independent or even self-discrediting news (Weichert). Thus the use of spin is usually done by those who have the funds to do so. Not only do the people and media suffer from its use, but so do opposing politicians with less funds and manpower during election periods. So when it comes to advertising and marketing specific issues, the ones with a financial advantage have a better chance at victory. The news agenda can thus be dictated by political parties (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Sambrook). And so political reporting has evolved into a battle for truth between analytical journalists and spin doctors on behalf of politicians, which undermines the quality of a democracy (Harcup).

Thirdly, is the impact of spin on popular culture. Whether it is via television, sports, events or something else, political authorities seek to connect themselves with that what is popular amongst the people, so that the politicians can attempt to identify themselves with the ordinary person and to put a finger on the very issues that appeal to the people. Political authorities must be popular in order to manage the emotions of the public, yet it is not at all necessary to have a majority favour a political authority's position. What matters is that fears and hopes in popular culture get recognized and addressed in politics. When a politician is looking to gain attention for an issue, aims to be re-elected or is simply working on his image, he often takes action to be seen by the public. Albeit by manner of speech, interviews, publicity stunts or legislation, as long as a media channel reports it, any form of publicity is publicity nonetheless. It is the promotional imperative that politicians use and spin carries in popular culture (Richards).

Particularly in recent years, spin has become a hot topic in the world of television shows as Trump and his administration act as great source material. Politics and spin have become a relatively grand part of popular culture in various ways, for instance, the American television shows called *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), *The Daily Show* (TDS) with Trevor Noah, *The Late Show* (TLS) with Stephen Colbert and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (JKL) with Jimmy Kimmel all focus on various issues like the discrepancies that take place in politics by mixing comedy with news and political debate (Baym). Not only do they make fun of politicians and their actions, but they also attempt to create some critical awareness amongst their viewers when controversial subjects or actions occupy the news. The effect of popular culture on spinning is thus that it castigates the ridiculousness of spin and its users, which in turn enables the public to be more critical towards (in)actions, political actors and pieces of legislation. Fault-finding popular culture shines a light on matters that normally do not get picked up on or at least not in-depth. For instance, TDS with Jon Stewart and Trevor Noah mixed news and entertainment with public affairs and pop culture. Its core focus lies in its experimentation to revive a type of political journalism that is critical, accessible, popular and unrestrained thanks to democratic principles. SNL's actor Alec Baldwin often critiques and ridicules Trump's actions and twist of facts by emphasizing them in sketches. In a few instances SNL addresses Trump's exaggeration of the national emergency at the American-Mexican border in the South and the way the President and his administration provide the public with certain information (Lemon). As a result of this criticism and mockery by influential hosts and actors in today's popular culture, Trump responds by calling anything that is unsupportive or unflattering as "fake news" and its distributors as "enemy of the people". He even openly admitted to his discreditation of critics by saying "I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you" in 2016 when he talked to television journalist Lesley Stahl (CBS News). His irritated reaction shows how effectively the media and entertainment industry can present a public figure that has little to no regard for objective facts and truths.

Additionally, the media outlets that broadcast programs such as these constantly develop their distribution channels and do not shy away from adapting to new technological advancements. They have expanded their media infrastructure technologically, economically and culturally by expanding cable television and delivering online content via various electronic devices (e.g. phones, tablets and computers) and applications (e.g. social media), as well as investing in faster distribution of their content via satellite systems, and by providing

content that appeals to multiple cultural and social groups. These developments allow more accessibility to information as they expand the audience's communicative boundaries, as well as having consolidated politics within entertainment (van Zoonen). Thanks to the merging of entertainment, political communication and technological advancements the term "infotainment" has gained more ground in the world of media. One may argue that the content of this type of broadcast journalism suffers as the basic principles of journalism such as independence, inquiry and verification of facts are sometimes deemed less crucial than the desire to create content that is somewhat sensational and enticing. Many networks are driven to ensure consumer loyalty and so it has come to be a highly competitive, commercial environment (Sinha-Roy). In other words, the quality of the news may decline yet on the other hand it becomes more eye-catching. The benefit for these late-night shows such as SNL is that many people seem to stray away from regular and perhaps more in-depth news broadcasts in order to tune in on their more shallow, yet still informative comedic counterparts. The entertainment draws in the audiences and subsequently people get more interested, informed and engaged (Jebril, Albaek and de Vreese). The creation of public interest enables the politicians to get across a message they so desire and popular culture offers plenty of platforms to do so thanks to the integration of mass media.

Last but not least, as Stephen Stockwell analyses the negative relationship between spin and the media, it may be the case that spin could be dangerous to democracy due to intense media management. The presence of spin may cause all political parties to use it when they have the opportunity and when this happens, spin will eventually undermine itself and devalue its efforts in a democratic debate. This will give politicians the ability to constantly claim that everything their opponents put out is a spin. The only way to counter this is by revealing every single aspect of media management that one has participated in. Additionally, when managing the media on every level possible, it may come to the point when a spin doctor's commercial interests clash with his political interests. It may lead the spin doctor to sell a political idea with underlying commercial thoughts and this may cross ethical boundaries.

2.2 The positive effects of spin

Besides the fact that spin in politics has several negative effects, it is only fair to mention the positive effects (Stockwell). Politics in a democracy hold a vast amount of topics to which every person can form and substantiate an own opinion. Whether it be certain legislation, education, nutrition, transportation or any other imaginable topic. When one lives in a democratic society, that person is allowed to support values that are important to that individual and to vote correspondingly. However, a democratic government cannot afford to present each debatable subject to the public and have them vote for each one every time as that would require an immense amount of time and resources. In order to have your values somewhat represented in politics, the public is given the chance to elect a representative that best fits their ideals. To present the public with the best possible candidates, the (social) media is used to help the public make a decision. Thus in that case the press acts as a messenger for different views and the spread of political awareness (Yunus). However, as was previously discussed the media can either act on behalf of the independent truth, the ones in power or even on behalf of their own political views. The media can therefore be used by either side of the spectrum and it allows the media to put forward the information or messages that they want the general populace to see. Ultimately it is up to the citizens to decide on whom they vote that represents their interests the best based on what (social) media puts out. The unfortunate downside to this is that people often choose to view the media channels that align with their own thoughts the most (Kanagavel and Chandrasekaran). This puts a limit on their objectivity and perspectives as many people only surround themselves with likeminded people and media. According to a new Pew Research Center study based on an online survey in 2014, this is the case for many conservatives who see Fox News as their main source of political information, opposed to liberals who follow a wider range of sources (Mitchell, Kiley and Gottfried). Spin doctors are undoubtedly part of the problem as they are amongst the ones that communicate (mis)information, however, they are the consequence of dominant mass media outlets and not the root cause. In spite of being known to manipulate information, in a way spin doctors are also the ones that help individuals and parties of the opposite sides to push through alternative messages and political information to the public, however distorted it may seem at times. For that very reason, spin can also be seen as a necessity as it allows spin doctors to articulate what is important to the citizens and to the politicians. With the help of the spin doctors, the politicians then shape their actions and talks according to that what is thought of as important. It opens up new avenues for communication in a competitive

environment. In essence we can consider it to be a tool that convinces people of a particular proposition in a society that is subjected to the influence of mass media. The presence of spin and its attributes provide the public with the opportunity to actively participate in society and have a functioning democracy.

Aside from offering opposite views, spin has also had the effect of inducing more critical research by journalists in search of the truth. Brian McNair mentions in his *An Introduction to Political Communication* that the occurrence of spin motivates them to conduct more thorough and critical research on political processes (McNair). It is often the case that journalists depend on political media advisers for content and these advisers control what information is given out. Because of that, the journalists' ability to fully and truly report on the politician's aims and opinions is limited. This interaction between journalists and political media advisors has accordingly become a relationship based on dependency and that is not something journalists want to rely on too much. For that very reason independent journalistic research is an essential necessity. On top of that, because spin is so present it has had the effect of increasing the sheer quantity of political information. Whether the news is correct, incorrect, complete or incomplete, the spreading of political information is taking place on a larger scale.

Chapter 3: Credibility and Accountability

Now that the term spin has been thoroughly examined, as well as its effects, there is one effect in particular that deserves more attention. As has been previously stated, one of the effects that spin has is that it affects the credibility of the media and those in politics.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, credibility stands for “the fact that someone can be believed or trusted” which is a fundamental requirement for a successful public representative (Cambridge University Press). Politics function as a system that allows the most important changes in society to be made and it requires certain political skills as well as a robust moral compass and an appreciation of ethical values to realize those changes (The Irish Times). People tend to blame politicians when something goes wrong, yet they rely on politicians for improvements too. Because of this dependency, we require politics and politicians to be credible and accountable for their (in)actions.

When it comes to politics, there is always a call for more modernisation and transparency as the dynamic body of politics keeps evolving. Transparency is key as it allows people to confide their trust in elected politicians. In order to maintain a level of credibility amongst politicians, few ways to do so are by creating a rigid legal framework that works to prevent and prosecute those who partake in corruption or bribery. By legally enforcing public representatives to declare all of their collected political donations, the public and media may see who lobby and support the politicians in order to research who may benefit from their political agenda (Holman and Luneburg). The Irish Times mention that more legal frameworks and legislation should be introduced and upheld, however, what makes this function even better is when the consequences for breaching these measures are seriously punitive as well. If these measures are properly enforced to ensure that politicians and their parties do not violate the rules, then the public will have more confidence in them and perhaps a less sceptical view of their conduct. By creating more trust among the people while ensuring transparency and strengthening legislation that regulates lobbying firms and their activities, it is nearly guaranteed that the public will come to see politicians as more credible, with or without spin.

Furthermore, spin allows the spin doctors, PR advisors and media specialists to gain credibility in the eyes of the public when they retain a prominent presence in the media and are constantly campaigning (Trajkoska). These actors are oftentimes tasked with intentionally infiltrating newsrooms to covertly push a politicians’ agenda, by said politician. The main objective is to create some sort of smokescreen that allows certain issues or information to

either be ignored, distorted or rephrased in a way that is more acceptable to the general public. The eventual goal is to have the general public accept that fabricated information as the one and only true reality without question. “Perception becomes reality and truth is relative” (Heath and Coombs).

Another way in which spin can heavily affect credibility negatively, is when opposing political parties expose another party’s actions and their motivations that were meant to sway public opinion in their favour (Klemp). To fight manipulation and corruption by politicians, an effective way to root it out is by contesting and publicising it entirely. With the help of public scrutiny of independent media, a political actor’s motives can be exposed to show the intent to manipulate public opinion. After being challenged and exposed, a loss in credibility is inevitable.

On the other hand, spin does not affect credibility as much when a politician’s constituency unconditionally continues to follow him despite his lies, deceit and threats. Take President Donald Trump as an example, some people actually find this behaviour appealing and addictive to the extent that they develop a form of admiration for someone – an underdog – that fights fiercely for his beliefs against a firm political establishment (Patterson). His continual deception does not only scare away possible electors, but it attracts them as well. Granted, President Donald Trump is an “interesting” individual that provides plenty of discussions to say the least when looking at credibility. One must also consider that the credibility of such a person is not under threat because of the fact that a large part of his loyal constituency may be prejudiced, uneducated, deceived or unaware of his actions. This is not to claim that all of his supporters fit this picture, yet a study from 2018 by Diana C. Mutz on ‘Status Threat’ show that many people who voted for Trump hold deep-seated anxieties and prejudices in fear of losing privileged social positions (Mutz). On top of that, during the exit polls of 2018, 61 percent of non-college-educated white voters voted Republican, compared to just 45 percent of white voters who were college-educated. Opposed to that, 53 percent of college-educated white voters voted for the Democratic part, while only 37 percent did so too without a degree (Harris). Thus a majority of Trump supporters who cast their ballot do not hold a degree. With Trump tapping into that fearful feeling of changing racial demographics and suggesting that racial minorities will eventually outnumber the white majority, he has gained a lot of support from white Americans that support anti-immigrant policies, oppose political correctness, lack educational degrees and as was mentioned before mainly surround themselves with likeminded people (Jacobs).

Particularly in Donald Trump's case, it seems as if his ignorance is what people have come to enjoy. He does not only challenge the established political elite, but outright knowledge as well. The fact that he challenges experts who are knowledgeable on climate science or global economics is what bonds him to his supporters. Many of whom are often dissatisfied and disgruntled with the way the game of politics has been played for years, and the politicians who ignored their voices (Khazan). It has taken away their faith in politics and made them willing to accept anything that challenges the ruling class and even common scientific knowledge. This has turned substantiated informative debates into a kind of contest for defamation, insults and misinformation. The feeling of being helpless, outsmarted and perhaps forgotten makes it easier for those who are frustrated to side with someone that questions the prevalent truth, even when it is misleading. He serves as a form of comfort, assurance and simplification of the world around them and because of that he still remains credible to a large part of the population.

As the implications for credibility have been laid out, what does spin do to a politician's accountability? Accountability is defined as "The requirement for representatives to answer to the represented on the disposal of their powers and duties and act upon criticisms" (Accountability in Public Administration: Definition, Nature and Forms). In general it means that one must perform a task to the best of his abilities, and an explanation must be given as to why it was done in a certain manner. Accountability is key to having a healthy democracy as it ensures that public figures will work in the interest of the people they serve (Guerin, McCrae and Shepherd). In public administration it implies that the elected representatives must act in the best of their abilities and are required to explain their actions and policies publicly, and because of that they carry a form of public responsibility. Particularly in a democracy that has evolved over the years, the accountability for a representative type of government has gained a more important role. Everyone is subjected to legal accountability as legislature enacts laws and a civil servant such as the President of the United States has to conform to it too. It is up to those in charge of the legal framework to analyse the activities that require accountability and to evaluate the potential impact the (un)ethical actions of an authoritative entity may have had (Frederickson and Ghore). Where the feeling of trust in government requires a level of accountability, a lack of accountability adds to the distrust in and pessimism towards governmental actors. For political accountability to be even more effective it has to be institutionalized and bound in a set of rules, a constitution for example (Schmitter). But there is also a form of moral accountability

since old customs, values and habits are also part of a social system, yet this fades into the background when there is something to gain. An elected representative has the responsibility and duty to provide sufficient information, an explanation or a justification to the public that demonstrates their performance (Cendón).

However, it is difficult to enforce and ensure accountability in government public services. In general a political representative in a democracy can be held accountable for his actions, inactions or failure for not disclosing his motivations. Should the public not be content with the politician's activities they hold the power to demonstrate, to call for further investigation or even demand his resignation, but the latter mostly applies to serious harmful offenses. Though there are few options to oppose certain behaviour, when it comes to spinning facts and stories in relation to credibility and accountability, one treads in murky waters. There are no real, legal punitive measures for politicians making use of spin as the manipulation of information has come to be so common in the political atmosphere, unless it is considered seriously damaging (Rappert). The real consequences of using and exposing spin are the loss of public trust in politics and the media which harms their image, as well as creating a stronger public sense for more critical scrutiny with regards to information and its distribution (Dubnick and Frederickson). For politicians it means that they will be voted out during election time or dropped by their party. But rather than accepting their failures and searching for improvements, it often turns into a blame game of pointing fingers instead of owning up to their responsibility (Savoie). There is no actual solution to combat or prevent political spin, however, these consequences may stimulate politicians to put in more effort to be more honest and transparent in order to prevent loss in trust. Stephen Stockwell believes that perhaps the more the public learns about spin doctoring, the more successfully they can become politically active in democratic debates and decision making processes themselves (Stockwell). With greater participation in representative democratic institutions, the people could influence the political narrative more.

One may wonder how it is that people with a significant public image can nevertheless keep on spinning and lying without being held accountable, to some members of the public it is mainly a matter of loyalty towards the underdog, as well as a feeling of competitiveness and the refusal to betray their representative (Flam). Loyalty to some is more important than complete honesty as loyalty can create the feeling of affiliation and the thought that there is more to gain as a (political) group, and so people are at times willing to overlook the "alternative facts" and lies. As of now, the ones that make use of spin or even lies in a

manipulative manner are oftentimes not effectively being held accountable for their actions and motivations to do so. An effective legal framework that addresses this is yet to be realized and enforced.

Conclusion

As has been clarified, political spins are not the same as lying. Whereas the former acts as an alteration and rearrangement of factual information so that it suits the messenger, the latter is simply sharing something that is factually untrue. Objective facts hold no value when one cannot benefit from them. In its core, both spin and lying are manipulative, premeditated and deceiving, yet they have become an even bigger integral part of modern (political) public relations.

We have come to see spin as a negative phenomenon that mainly politicians and the media make use of. Because of this, the public distrust in representatives and mainstream media has grown. The traditional mechanisms such as fact checking by media outlets are normally used to identify what is true and what is false, however, polls show that the trust in mainstream media has dropped significantly (Tsipursky). Particularly in the U.S. trust in the media has gradually been dropping over the past few years, but few of the things that may have sped up the decline were the unequal treatment of the presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016 by the media, as well as Trump's continual hostile remarks towards the media (Swift). It is argued that the media spends too much time highlighting the controversies of the individual or party they dislike and so the people shy away from the traditional channels of information such as news reports on television. Amongst the supporters of said individual or party it also creates the sensation of constantly being attacked for having a different view.

Additionally, social media has had a hand in allowing the spread of false and doctored stories, causing true stories to fade into the background. With today's supply of news being so easily accessible and prominent, it has gotten harder for the public to separate reality from fiction, and politicians wisely make use of the abundant communication channels. To politicians the one thing that matters the most is to be elected, not to tell the truth. To be elected, politicians must appear to radiate trustworthiness instead of actually being trustworthy. It is in the politicians' interest to bypass critical fact checking by journalists from traditional media outlets and to influence their followers via social media among other things. Many people are prone to believe that what suits their own beliefs and values which the politicians know, and so they spin facts in their advantage to make it look even more appealing. Eventually many people will come to recognize the manipulation of information by politicians and when that happens the public's trust in politics will decline. In order to somewhat contest this continual cycle of spin, politicians are required to be transparent down

to the bone, to show their actual trustworthiness and above all to be honest. Even though the use of spin has become so entrenched in society nowadays, people do have the power to call it out and demand changes, even when legislation is rendered “useless”. If the people really want spin to be addressed adequately, they can demand and undertake several effective actions.

It is important that plenty of transparency is guaranteed when politicians and the media gather information, as well as disclosing how they obtained that information. This allows objectivity and accordingly people can create their own views. Reforms to the legal structure are also necessary as they currently lack the effective punitive measures, and thus the incentive for public figures to speak the absolute truth is negligible. Furthermore, the independence of uncontrolled critical journalism that allows fact checking must be ensured. If the channels that distribute information are managed, those in power have the ability to shape reality and influence the uninformed population. Finally, it is important that in a democracy the democratic principles that shape it are upheld. People hold the power to make changes when they really desire to do so, and thus when the public suspects any political or informative deceptions they must have the power to voice their concerns freely.

These are all measures that may help to bring about a change in the way politicians deal with information, yet to be completely honest, there is currently no foreseeable solution to fully prevent or ban political spin. There is no piece of legislation that may make its use an offense. The most effective way for the public to show resistance is to become more politically active in representative institutions in order to influence the political narrative more. In an ideal democracy, it ultimately comes down to the fact that “the authority remains that of the will of the people” (Mastrorosa).

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