

GUARDIANS OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS, THEIR FUNCTIONS IN THE FORMATION OF THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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Summary

The proposed study examines the complex and multifaceted communication process, as well as the role of the media in shaping public perception, values, and beliefs. Recognizing the power and responsibility of the mass media for perceiving the environment, emphasizing the importance of media literacy and critical thinking of information consumers, we propose to comprehend the key functional of specialists who dramatically influence the media landscape development, agenda molding, as well as “information bubbles” creating that can be as favorable for the further development of the society, as inhibiting it.

In our opinion guidekeepers, spin-doctors and news-ombudsmen play the key roles among communication specialists. They influence not only the control and filters of the content broadcast, but also the formation of moral principles of media workers in general and the creation of professional ethical codes.

Considering, that modern media platforms serve as the means of spreading social, political, cultural ideas, as well as public discourse of various orientations, it is worth actualizing functions of the media (both individual representatives and platforms in general) such as: conscious design and dissemination of information; management of public perception in order to prevent political and economic crises; ensuring honesty, accountability and transparency between the public and representatives of the media community. Particularly these functions the mentioned media persons are able to provide, as despite the different contextual bases, they all play an important role in the process, management and development of ethical principles of communication.

Key words: gate-keeper, spin-doctor, news-ombudsman, media person, communication, information, media ethics.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/5905>

1. Introduction

In modern conditions of extensive informatization, the foundations of the information and communication process are the formation and functioning basics of the media landscape covering various stages and elements involved in the transmission of information, ideas and messages from sources to recipients through various communication channels. Understanding the communication process functioning is critical for understanding the media landscape work. In addition to the established and well-known stages of the communication process, such as: a sender, a message, encoding, decoding, channels, noise, receivers and feedback, some new components of this process are appearing, in particular: gatekeeping, which is responsible for controlling and filtering information, before it will reach a wider audience through the media; spin-doctoring – a technology aimed at presenting information, an event or a person in a favorable light,

using persuasive language, framing and strategic messages for the purpose of managing public perception; controlling provided by the news ombudsman, whose activity comprises not only ensuring the honesty and transparency of broadcast information, but also investigating and considering complaints and disputes between the public and the media; the context of the broadcast information which may affect the interpretation of the message; media literacy – the ability to critically analyze and interpret media content, aiming at navigating a huge number of information sources and being able to tell the reliable information from the fake one. Understanding the communication process in the media landscape is aimed at helping to make grounded decisions on the information consumed and building discussion platforms on the role of the media in the society, their adherence to ethical codes and value guidelines. Therefore, considering these issues helps developing relations of information production and consumption, which is the focus of scientists and practitioners all over the world, in particular: K. Barzilai-Nahon, S. Bowen, D. Watts, E. Erzikova, A. Zerfass, D. Krueckeberg, H. Kurtz, M. Latzer, K. Marsden, A. Moreno, D. Tambini, R. Tench, D. DeIulis, N. Just. Domestic scientists also pay a lot of attention to issues of ethical regulation of media activity, in particular journalistic ethics, but unfortunately, at the legislative level, even in the new Law “On Media” No. 2710-IX dated November 3, 2022, issues of ethical regulation in the media are not outlined, although V. Ivanov with a group of scholars of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Institute of Journalism has been researching ethical codes, axiological foundations of journalism and the development of media literacy relations for many years. In particular, the founder of the weekly “Mirror of the Week” V. Mostovoy in his joint work with S. Shturhetskyyi (*Ivanov V., Shturchetskij S., 2011: 8*) “Practicum on journalistic ethics” states: “professional ethics is like a security net, and for a journalist it is like a vestibular function that enables one navigating, keeping upright, moving with the straight back”.

It is clear that not only journalists should take care of the media space protection but also other representatives of the media community, who do not only inform the audience of events and phenomena, but, in our opinion, should also educate this audience, instill aesthetic taste, propose ideas for reflection, form cultural trends to improve the quality of life and health. Bare naturalism has never been an aesthetic model, as it is important for a person during a creative process to generate forms and meanings bringing pleasure to the senses, inspiring, captivating, giving understanding of perspective, not, merely, reflecting a dry fact.

Taking into account the duties of traditional and mostly interactive media, it is worth taking a close up at the activities and functions of the “guardians” of the communication process, which contribute to forming the media responsibility, and to some extent, reflect morality – a subject that examines the connection between the broadcast content and social behavior.

2. Spin-doctoring as a tool for managing information messages

The modern communication process, actively overcoming the limitations of the information space, has evolved due to the development of spin-doctoring methods which conceptual foundations play an important role in forming the information landscape and influence the public perception. The boost of global interest in spin-doctoring technology while managing information and communication policy indicates a growing emphasis on strategic communications and message exchange, for spin-doctoring methods are often used both for crisis communication and reputation management.

Since spin-doctoring technologies are becoming more and more common, the need for media literacy and accountability mechanisms is growing as well therefore we suggest returning to the primary meaning of the concept “spin doctor”.

When considering the technology of spin-doctoring it is worth recalling the year 1984, the debate between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale on which outcome the term was firstly used in the “New York Times”. It meant highly qualified public relations specialists who offered journalists to use ready-made interpretations for describing certain events. Particularly, in the context of such offer to journalists we should recall the most often mentioned spin-doctor Howard Kurtz, who began his career believing that journalism is clean – and media professionals are engaged exclusively in the service of the public, searching for the truth – and, unfortunately, came to the opposite conclusion, which led him to switch from journalism to spin-doctoring.

We come across the information everywhere in modern literature that H. Kurtz (*Kurtz H., 1998: 211-223*) has written the book “The Spin Cycle: How the White House and the Media Manipulate the News” and this publication is a desk book for spin-doctors. But the fact that he regrets in a way, about the need of using templates and the labels applied by spin-doctors and that the patterns can be used for the benefit of increasing the public responsibility of the nation, is unfortunately not often mentioned. This book describes strategies of “convincing feminists to support a not-so-spotless leader, Democrats to smear a young woman, and journalists to ignore a scandal and report as if the indictment was a special scandalous scheme to vilify a decent man”.

Thus, we can conclude that despite the positive idea under the concept of doctor and the prefix spin, which is not completely comprehensible for common people spin-doctoring in the classical sense is considered a synonym of political manipulation with the help of modern media. It involves using a rich arsenal of specific methods and technologies affecting people's minds: publication of favorable messages, formation of certain emotions in the target audience with the help of visual means or verbal images, etc. All of these techniques are different in their impact and content, but they have one thing in common: they all are aimed at creating a certain emotional mood and psychological attitudes. The main material with which spin-doctors influence the public's perception of an event is information, or more precisely, the management of information flows. Therefore, a spin-doctor has to deal with news management, i.e. presenting the event favorably for the customer, and correcting the coverage of the event in the media after the information development has acquired an adverse effect.

Currently, quite an interesting issue is discussed in media discourse: to what extent spin-doctoring is justified from the point of view of politics, corporate management whereas, to our mind, the most important aspect is the impact of spin-doctoring technology on the final audience, on the public. From this perspective, we find useful the study of our compatriot H. Pocheptsov (*Pocheptsov H., 2008*), who was one of the first in our territory to start studying the issue of spin-doctoring. His works carefully examined as well as exploration of the British researcher D. Watts (*Watts D., 1997*), who offers 5 stages classification of PR spin-doctoring technology: 1) pre-spin – preparation before the event; 2) post-spin – polishing the event; 3) tornado-spin – an attempt to divert public interest in another direction; 4) spin-control – management of events that get out of control; 5) spin-down – management of events that are no longer under control to prevent further losses enable understanding appropriateness of spin-doctoring in the corporate sector in crisis times.

Spin-doctoring technologies, when used correctly, allow finding ways of effective, fruitful and effective communication with the public. The main strategies and methods of spin-doctoring in the context of managing information flows in various types of organizations in periods of crisis threat or its development having been considered showed that in situations of crisis and reputational risks, spin-doctoring specialists cannot do without spin-doctoring technologies to

effectively solve communication tasks and level negative outcomes. Therewith, it is desirable they should adhere to not only corporate standards and the desire of ensuring one's own reputation, but also take care of it (reputation) for the future, accounting for all ethical norms, rules and codes.

3. Gatekeeping and its key effect

Today, significant changes in information consuming are specified by the diversification of Internet platforms, the evolution of gadgets, etc., that raises a number of issues, including: information overload, misinformation, sensationalism of headlines, filter bubbles and echo chambers, censorship and propaganda, responsibility, etc. Although the Internet offers access to a large amount of information, it also develops problems related to the reliability and quality of this information. The evolving media landscape requires the society to be vigilant, critical and responsible consumer of information in order to make informed decisions and reduce the risk of misinformation and manipulation.

The task of providing the society with “clean” information is laid, to some extent, on the gatekeepers, whose activities are aimed at defining the agenda, choosing the forms and channels of specified topics broadcast, as well as forming public opinion and analyzing the impact of information on the audience. Let's recall the primary use of the concept “gatekeeper” by D. White (*White D., 1950*), precisely for news study, when in 1950 he was studying the articles of a city daily newspaper for a week trying to come to a conclusion about the principle by which the editor filtered the information. So, despite the fact that the term was introduced into scientific use by K. Levin in 1947 (*Levin K., 1947*) which meant protection principle in general, it was D. White (*White D., 1950: 28*), who adapted it to the media sphere, developing the concept with one “main filter” that passively refers to the information flow.

In our opinion, this concept is not perfect, because according to it, the control process is neither protected from prejudices, editorial judgments and the influence of media owners or political plans, or takes into account the peculiarities of the socio-political system, ideological and socio-cultural context, as well as factors of the institutional order (*Mytko A., 2014: 47*).

By the above studies, we can conclude that with a fairly responsible mission, the activity of a gatekeeper as well as a spin-doctor is faulty in some points for the information filtered by them may only look like a manifestation of someone's deeply personal preferences. Accordingly, in order to establish effective gatekeeping, a combination of skills, ethical considerations and responsibilities is expected including:

- knowing the basic principles of journalism, in particular accuracy, honesty, objectivity and transparency;
- awareness of the covered topic as well as other views on it and technologies;
- the ability to assess the informational value of stories and understanding of the criteria for selecting relevant and meaningful messages for the audience;
- compliance with ethical norms and moral principles in the media;
- verifying facts and sources of obtained information;
- striving for diversity and inclusiveness in news coverage;
- providing balanced coverage, presenting different views on the problem;
- avoiding sensationalism, bias and excessive emphasis on certain aspects of broadcasted information;
- taking into account the interests and needs of contact groups.
- media literacy and critical thinking;

- adaptability to today's conditions and widespread digitalization and various digital platforms;
- self-reflection and evaluation of the decisions taken from the point of view of principles and standards.

Observing the main relations of a gatekeeper's activities requires being dedicated to the fundamental values of a media specialist, continuous self-improvement and a deep sense of responsibility for providing accurate, fair and valuable information to the public.

In general, gatekeeping is a fundamental function of media on the whole and journalism in particular. It helps maintain the quality and integrity of news reports while guiding the selection and presentation of information to the public. However, it is important to recognize that gatekeeping is not granted from challenges, including potential bias and the influence of various factors on editorial decisions.

4. The news-ombudsman is the founder of the media ethics

In contrast to the previously mentioned “guardians”, as well as to monitor ethics and morality in the media environment, the news-ombudsman institute has appeared, namely, the Organization of News-Ombudsmen and Standards Editors (ONO) – a modern international non-profit organization whose members are representatives of readers, journalists, editors from all over the world for implementing standards in both traditional and interactive media. Employees of this deal with complaints from consumers of various forms of information (textual, visual, audio) and resolve conflicts between them and the media. As a rule, each specialist is a member of the news-ombudsmen institute runs their own column or a communication channel, where the conflict situations are analyzed. He often considers complaints in a pre-trial procedure that could end up in court proceedings. Today, there are only a few dozen media in the world that have news-ombudsmen service.

For precise understanding the functions of the news-ombudsman, let's consider the history of this concept, because it reveals the essence of the activity of both individual ombudsmen and the entire institution of media regulation. A detailed description of the history of a news-ombudsman phenomenon can be found in the “Guide to media self-regulation”, compiled by the representative of the OSCE Office for Media Freedom Myklos Harasti (*Harasti M., 2008 : 64*), where he notes that: “ombudsman” is a Swedish word (“representative”) that has become popular in other languages as the name of a mediator who examines citizens' complaints. It was first used in the press by “the Courier-Journal” newspaper in Louisville in 1967, which assigned the local head office of information to regulate interactions between readers and journalists. Then, in 1970, the management of “the Washington Post” newspaper set up a department under the leadership of the deputy editor-in-chief, in which readers' complaints were considered, internal memos were drawn up based on the results of such consideration, columns where the readers could express their unbiased opinion were published. Gradually, the system was being improved by integrating into interactive portal that enabled much easier and faster providing comments, receiving posts, critical remarks about errors, as well as giving feedback to the readers (*Ulen. G Smith, 2008: 78*).

What is the main task of the news-ombudsman and how their activities comply with the media ethics? It is the media ombudsman who ensures respect for the rules and customs established by the mass media they (ombudsman) represent providing a kind of internal quality control. This means having a contract with the audience on:

- providing the most accurate, complete and comprehensible information;

- clear separation of information and comments;
- correcting the errors;
- reflecting pluralism and diversity of opinions;
- ensuring non-violation of human rights and respect for privacy.

It is the news-ombudsman who tries to find mutually satisfactory solutions to complaints, for their further coverage, as such solutions will contribute to the fact that not only the editors of traditional media will work even harder to comply with ethical standards, but also amateurs, in our opinion, will begin to apply in their materials, at least, generally accepted ethical and moral codes (*Ulen. G Smith, 2008: 80*).

We would like to emphasize that modern media enthusiasts (bloggers, influencers) often forget that financial success obtained at the expense of hype is not a long-term chewing gum, especially today, when the question of organizing an “ethical police” in the media based on the news-ombudsmanship institution is risen not only at the national level or in individual news-rooms, but also among the bloggers more responsible towards their profession that critically impact the consciousness of the society as a whole. After all, today, a socially active Internet audience needs reliable and accurate information to obtain an objective picture of the world and make informed public decisions. Additionally, this audience plays an important role in the system of ethical regulation: it reacts positively or negatively to publications, leaving the comments and refutations (in case of an error). Such practice gives rise to a fundamentally different approach to media ethics. The openness and interactivity of the media resource becomes an important component of regulation. Where the author has crossed the line, the society acts as an ethical barometer, reacting to it with likes, critical remarks, and retorts.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we want to focus on the fact that most of the ethical principles developed during the last century were oriented towards the commercial model of mass media. It certainly had its pros and cons. On the one hand, in a number of countries with totalitarian regimes and an active role of the state in media regulation, the political doctrine often affected the ethical norms of the journalist's behavior. The economic motivation of his activity limited his freedom of expression. Today, an amateur journalist often has no financial incentives which in a sense makes him less dependent on external factors, such as, for example, editorial policy. But, unfortunately, this freedom extends as far as the lack of understanding of the civil or legal responsibility of disseminated information.

Recently, a lot has been done at the national level for improving the quality and ethical standards of the media, namely, by the body of self-regulation of the work of journalists and editorial offices in Ukraine (Journalistic Ethics Commission), the Code of Ethics of the Ukrainian Journalist was proposed in 2004, revised and edited in 2013. This code contributes to the support of projects aimed at editorial independence, ethical management, transparency and building a self-regulatory trustworthy system.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the era of socially responsible journalism has not yet set in, but traditional and interactive media, as well as their representatives such as news-ombudsmen, should start a dialogue to develop unified mechanisms of ethical regulation, to determine the balance of the interests of the society and the media. The latter, having a huge social influence, are a formative factor in the development of the global information space. And what level of democracy and objectivity it will be endowed with depends, to a large extent, on the relevant activities of spin-doctors, gate-keepers and news-ombudsmen.

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