

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF ONLINE MYSTIFICATION AND FAKE NEWS: GOOD PRACTICES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL ADVISER'S ROLE

Angelina Markovska

Abstract: The paper explores the functions and responsibilities of the political advisor in the context of the global problem of fake news and post-truth. Based on this exploration, certain conclusions are drawn about the critical specifics of the political advisor's role in transferring good practices within public administration. These practices involve creating mechanisms for detecting fake news and tools for their revelation. The main aim of the paper is to examine the political advisor's position as an institution that, on one hand, manages the flow of information and, on the other hand, facilitates the transfer of good practices in public administration.

Keywords: political advisor, ethic, good practices, mystification, fake news

1. Introduction

The democratic governance of the global information society requires a system of communication competencies on behalf of public authority representatives. Bulgaria is a republic with a parliamentary government, and the structure of state power includes institutions that ensure the necessary activities for the existence and functioning of the state. These activities ensure a balance in state-political life (Montesquieu 1984, 5).

In this regard, the main objective of the paper is to examine the place of the political advisor as an institution that, on one hand, manages the flow of information and, on the other hand, performs the transfer of good practices in public administration.

The main research goals set by the author are threefold: (1) to clarify the concept of fake news and its impact on political and public life in Bulgaria and abroad, (2) to define the tools for combating it, and (3) to define the role of the political advisor in this process.

2. Fake News as a Tool for Manipulating Public Opinion

At the beginning, it is important to define the concept of fake news. They have many names: post-truths, online manipulations, post-news, semi-news, alternative news, fake news, propaganda, nonsense, information garbage, fabricated news, fiction, conspiracies, made-up stories, social bots, trolls, false information, fabrications for the World Wide Web, and many more. 2016 is the year of an explosion of fake or distorted information claiming to be real. This phenomenon has been described and registered by Oxford linguists with the term “post-truth” - the formation of public opinion is influenced no less by personal and emotional than by objective facts.

According to Elin Kachulski (Kachulski 2017), fake news is a type of hoax, a deliberate dissemination of false information through print or electronic media to mislead the audience. Often, eye-catching headlines or entirely fictional events are used to generate public interest and cause serious damage to the opponent. Increasing traffic from hits and audience leads to the generation of advertising revenue, regardless of the veracity of the published article. Easy access to ad revenue, the promotion of social media, especially Facebook, and the potential to heighten political tensions all contribute to the spread of fake news.

Fake news is not a phenomenon of our times. Examples of such practices can be found as far back as the Roman Empire, in the 1st century BC, when Octavian Augustus conducted a disinformation campaign against Mark Antony that ended in his suicide.

The phenomenon of fake news arises as a consequence of the erosion of values and social relevance of the information presented by traditional media. Journalism theory indicates that misleading news also existed during the era of traditional media, often being curious, sensational, and entertaining. In this context, fake news exhibits a core set of characteristics: rapid dissemination, an accessible medium through social networks, psychological manipulation by playing on users' fears and emotions, and freedom of action—anyone can be the author of fake news and has likely read at least one.

Journalistic stories in traditional media are based on the credibility of facts and sources, balance of viewpoints, adherence to ethical rules and norms, and the creation of critical thinking. Authoritative traditional media set a good example in the digital realm. Quality editorial content, consistently distinct from other forms of communication, is at the heart of modern online business models. News sites, for instance, successfully monetize consumer attention through digital subscriptions. Measuring visits, interest in the material, and cultivating a habit of using the same online source by loyal users contribute to the so-called attention economy—the production of digital resources

The free internet space continues to be a territory of entertainment and anonymous expression, without falling under the regulations applied to classical media. Citizen journalism has positively developed the self-confidence of user audiences to create content that complements or competes with editorial media content. Consumers of information have begun to inform themselves, often ignoring journalistic services and trusting the writings exposed in forum groups. This negative tendency indicates the involvement of an uncritical mass in the whirlpool of collective emotions and personal opinions.

Mass journalism is a product of mass audiences—fans, bloggers, and users with various interests—who compose messages on given topics without checking facts and sources, often producing anonymous reactions and introducing sensational or shocking headlines. When there is unintentional or deliberate economic gain behind these efforts, the phenomenon of fake news emerges. Parallel to the attention economy is the disinformation economy.

The economics of misinformation is now the key model of fake news. An anonymous website resembling a well-known online publication is set up to publish stories with sensational, shocking, or manipulative headlines, relying on information from unreliable sources. Truth is not a leading factor. These sites comment on current events but also recall old information with proper associative links, effectively recycling content. In terms of resources, the production of fake news does not require significant investment.

The issue of spreading false information finds an easy solution: fake sites use the advertising tools of Facebook and Google. They also register activity on various pages and groups on the most popular social networks. Fake news thrives when shared in interest groups.

Historically, fake news has always aimed to manipulate the audience, creating misconceptions and causing image damage to a person, party, institution, or country. Such practices can escalate a state of war, a political crisis, or cause a collapse in the economic balance of the affected country. One example is the coverage of a particular moment during the 2015 meeting between Putin and Belarusian President Lukashenko in Minsk, which aimed to end the war in Ukraine. The situation involving “President Putin’s chair” turned out to be speculative. Lukashenko and Angela Merkel were talking before sitting at the negotiating table, and the host of the meeting was particularly animated. At this point, Lukashenko, unaware, holds and pulls the chair that Putin is trying to sit in.

Most media coverage depicted Lukashenko as adjusting the chair to make Putin more comfortable. However, other media “reversed the frame,” suggesting the chair was pulled deliberately, making it appear as though Putin was put in a position to fall when sitting down. Public comments under the photos left the audience with the impression that a deliberate, malicious attack on the Russian president was made by the Belarusian president (Penchev 2015). This is an emblematic example of manipulated footage and fake news. In communication terms, such coverage during bilateral diplomatic meetings could ignite a political scandal, leading to an international political crisis. One of the main skills and duties of a political adviser in such situations is to identify false information, expose manipulation, and propose an optimal solution to quickly and minimally damage the image.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) proposes a table with eight indicators to identify fake news on the Internet (Delcheva 2017):

- **Who is the source:** Check who the site is, who owns it, etc.
 - **Read beyond the headline:** Often, the headline is sensational, but the information in the text does not match it.
 - **Check the author:** Look for information on whether the author is real or fictional.
 - **Sources:** Check the sources cited in the text to see if they are credible.
 - **Check the date of publication:** Often, old news is edited and circulated as new, even if it is no longer current.
 - **Is it a joke:** It is possible that the information published is satire.
 - **Check for objectivity:** Consider whether your existing knowledge about a given topic influences your judgment about it.
 - **Ask the experts:** Consult a subject matter expert to confirm or reject the information.
- The American portal fakenewswatch.com groups fake news into three categories:
- **Fake/Hoax News:** Fake news that relies on the naivety of readers to spread it as real.
 - **Satirical Sites:** These also mislead but aim to make fun, not to deceive.
 - **Clickbait:** These sites create news out of parts of true stories, but hint at and add other details to scaremonger. Most of them are very conspiratorial in nature and absolutely untrustworthy.”

The topic of fake news became especially popular in connection with the statements of US President Donald Trump at the beginning of his term. He frequently used the social platform Twitter, as well as his public speeches, to label as fake news any information in the media that did not match his own judgment or self-assessment. Moreover, Trump often denounced specific media outlets as fake news factories, including the prestigious New York Times and TV channels CNN, NBC, etc.

The media and media organizations in the US and around the world use Trump’s statements to expose them and point out their errors and inaccuracies. The Pulitzer Prize-winning PolitiFact project (PolitiFact 2017), created by the newspaper The Tampa Bay Times (est. 1884), is among the recognized authoritative fact-checkers of American politicians’ claims. According to PolitiFact, Trump’s 2015 statements and claims won the anti-lie of the year award. Of all his verified statements, 17% were rated as outright lies, 33% as lies, 20% as mostly false, and only 16% as true or mostly true.

Hillary Clinton was a frequent target of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. According to a December 2016 Pew Research Center poll, 64% of American adults admitted that fake news causes confusion in their perceptions of current events. Additionally, 23% of respondents admitted to having personally participated in the spread of fake news.

According to an article published by the Deutsche Presse-Agentur, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is a major target of fake news campaigns in Europe (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2016). The same agency reported that the most frequent topics of fake news are „the imminent collapse of the West, the promotion of Russia, and the portrayal of Ukraine as the aggressor in the conflict between the two countries“ (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 2016).

3. The Functions of the Political Advisor (in the example of the Republic of Bulgaria)

Article 28(4) of the Public Administration Act (PAAL, 1998) states that „*the activities of the political cabinets of the Prime Minister and Ministers shall be supported by advisers on certain matters, who*

may not perform management functions, as well as by experts and technical assistants. “ Depending on the functions of the institution in which they work, it is crucial that these advisers possess a broad range of skills and qualities. Quick thinking and timely responses are essential in an environment of intensive workflow, with strict adherence to the law and the code of ethics. Ethical standards are a fundamental component of the working culture of civil servants, including political advisers. They should uphold public trust by setting a good example for others. In this respect, the ethical standards that generally guide them are:

- **A sense of proportion and fairness:** They must be able to withstand the most thorough scrutiny at any moment. Their duties extend beyond mere compliance with the law.
- **Avoid financial or other dependencies:** They should not place themselves in situations where financial or other forms of dependency could influence their performance.
- **Prevent and resolve conflicts of interest:** They must take steps to avoid conflicts of interest and act promptly to resolve any that arise.
- **Be impartial, open-minded, and analytical:** They should be guided by the interests of the institution they represent and work to preserve its authority. They must be prepared to admit and correct mistakes and accept the consequences.
- **Accept recommendations and decisions based on merit:** In comparative assessment procedures, they should accept recommendations and decisions based solely on real merit and other factors expressly provided by law.
- **Maintain independence and impartiality:** They must remain independent and impartial in all their actions.
- **Avoid arbitrary actions and preferential treatment:** They should refrain from actions that could adversely affect members of the public and must show no preferential treatment to any subjects regardless of the circumstances.

Based on the European Code¹, it is important that public sector workers use the powers delegated to them solely for the purposes for which they are granted by the relevant provisions. Public officials should avoid using these powers for purposes that lack a legal basis or are not motivated by a specific public interest.

The Political Adviser, as part of the public authority’s administration, performs the general functions outlined in the Code (European Ombudsman 2016) but also has individual responsibilities. When it is necessary to inform and advise on an issue, the adviser manages the entire information flow, selecting and presenting only reliable and verified information to the governing entity. In such situations, the adviser’s morality, ethics, and analytical thinking are crucial.

It is important to address another significant issue related to manipulated information provided to or from the media. The information flow generated by the media plays a crucial role in shaping events within a country. Therefore, it is essential for a political adviser to have the sensitivity to counteract the influence of manipulated information sources, thereby safeguarding the security and credibility of the institution they represent.

By definition, a political adviser is expected to have strong political ties to the minister for whom they work. While this does not necessarily mean that the adviser must be a member of the minister’s party, they must be fully aligned with the minister’s views to ensure that the advice provided is consistent with the minister’s political perspectives and values. The practice, often seen in Eastern European countries, of appointing a political adviser from one party in the coalition to ‘keep an eye on’ a minister from another coalition party is inherently unstable and usually leads to tensions and disruptive dynamics (James, Ben-Gera 2004, 19).

It is interesting to note that in Western Europe, the most sought-after political advisers are those who assist the minister in dealings with the press and support general decision-making. Experts who focus narrowly on a particular issue are usually in the minority and are hired for their specific knowledge or experience related to matters important to the minister. These advisers typically have relevant

¹ <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/bg/resources/code.faces#/page/1>

professional experience or academic specialization and are often in mid- or late-career. Trends indicate that within the ministry, these expert advisers concentrate on their specialized areas but are frequently expected to „take an interest“ in other areas as well (James, Ben-Gera 2004, 23).

In general, practice shows that a political advisor performs the following main functions:

- **Party Liaison:** Engaging with party representatives, parliamentarians, regional and municipal councilors, party supporters, and possibly political parties in other countries. By definition, this is an area where civil servants are usually prohibited from supporting the minister.

- **Relationships with Other Ministers:** Effective governments have a system for inter-ministerial coordination on policy development and administrative matters, usually handled by civil servants. However, there are partisan matters on which civil servants cannot work, and politically sensitive issues the minister would prefer to handle through someone they trust.

- **Advice on Current Issues:** Providing guidance on immediate policy issues, often related to current media headlines.

- **Comments on Proposals:** Reviewing and commenting on proposals prepared by civil servants in the ministry.

- **Liaison with Party Supporters in the Legislature:** Making supporters aware of the minister’s proposals and encouraging them to make useful interventions in debates or to pose favorable questions to the minister.

- **Preparation for Public Appearances:** Assisting the minister in preparing for parliamentary debates, appearances before parliamentary committees, major speeches, or media interviews. Ministers often find it easier to prepare with someone they know well and trust politically.

- **Briefing on Government Proposals Outside the Minister’s Responsibilities:** Providing briefings on issues discussed in Cabinet or Ministerial Council meetings that may not directly affect the minister’s ministry but on which the minister might want to express an opinion. Such interventions are usually political, and the minister will turn to their political advisers for assistance.

- **Proposing New Policies:** Suggesting new policy ideas or developing initiatives. Unlike civil servants, who may be cautious about controversial areas, policy advisers can propose ideas that civil servants might dismiss as unconventional.

- **Acting as an Informal Messenger:** Contacting influential party supporters, pressure groups, friendly academic organizations or think tanks, business leaders, or trade unionists (Viorescu, Pedreira 2008, 232).

These interactions and functions indicate that to perform effectively, a political advisor must possess both expertise and personal qualities such as communication skills, responsibility, loyalty, and more.

4. Anti-Fake News Tools and Techniques

To combat fake news, Facebook has launched a tool designed to help users identify fake news and manipulative information on the social network. Initially, this tool will be implemented in 14 countries, including the U.S. The innovation appears as a message above the news section on a user’s page for several days. When clicked, the message directs users to tips and information on how to detect and respond to fake news. One recommendation is to carefully evaluate the web address of a site to determine if it “mimics” the address of reputable news sources.

In France, Facebook will collaborate with several leading media outlets—AFP, BFM Television, L’Express, Le Monde, Libération, Franceinfo, France Médias Monde, and 20 Minutes—to address the problem of hoaxing and manipulative information. This collaboration aims to ensure that the social platform is not used to spread fake news.

Additionally, Facebook will support the recently launched Cross-Check initiative, funded by Google News Lab, which aims to quickly identify and debunk fake news. A total of 17 French media outlets are participating in the campaign, in partnership with the respected NGO First Draft News (Wardele 2017).

These measures respond to criticism that the social network has been passive in combating fake news and hoaxes, particularly highlighted during the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign when imitations of authentic journalistic content were widely disseminated online.

Bulgaria is also addressing this issue. On April 6, 2017, Facebook announced the launch of a fake news detection tool on its platform in Bulgaria (Tashkova 2017). The following day, the company introduced a new version of its website. Google has also announced that it will flag search results containing fake news in its database (Tashkova 2017). As in other regions, fake news in Bulgaria is used to generate traffic to publishing websites and as part of hybrid warfare. These sites are relatively easy to identify using the indicators mentioned above. Krassimir Gadzhokov, a cybersecurity consultant in Canada, has created the Media Eye project, which identifies many Bulgarian-language news websites as either anonymous or lacking sufficient public information about their owners (Gadzhokov 2016).

On April 4, 2017, BTA published an article describing various methods for identifying fake news. Two days later, Club Z also published a detailed and expanded piece on the same topic.

Ultimately, the most crucial step is not for the media to self-censor but for state institutions to implement measures. An example of such a practice can be seen in the Czech Republic, where authorities have established a state institution dedicated to combating fake news.

5. The Function of the Political Adviser in the Process

Having discussed the concept of fake news and the tools available to combat it, it is now time to analyze the role of the political adviser in this process. As an expert, confidant, and analyst, the political adviser gathers and consolidates information into their own databases, filtering out essential and valuable data. The institution they represent relies on the adviser's ethics and professionalism to make informed, reasoned, and effective management decisions.

Information can be sourced not only from the media but also from third parties. The Czech government's practice of creating an institution to combat fake news could serve as a valuable example for political advisers in Bulgaria. Investments in combating fake news could include training, workshops, and practical courses on identifying, preventing, and responding to fake news and manipulation. These initiatives would enhance the ability to prevent such destructive tendencies. Additional measures and initiatives by regulatory authorities could be introduced in collaboration with civil society, institutions, and NGOs. For example, creating platforms to report and verify unregulated, unconfirmed information branded as fake news could be beneficial. News agencies might also contribute by refuting fake news with well-supported arguments from the concerned parties.

It is evident that fake news is a global issue. Bulgaria has its own specific challenges and negative consequences for public figures and political life. There is a need for the development of tools for identifying fake news, fostering a skeptical attitude towards information, and preparing personnel to address the challenges of fake news and post-truth, particularly within the role of the political adviser.

6. Information Manipulation

It is a widely held belief that the antidote to fake news lies with the monopolists of new information–technology giants Google and Facebook. Recently, both companies have faced increased public criticism, particularly following the US election results. Since manipulated information is disseminated through technological means, it is logical to seek solutions in this area. In a unified corporate stance, Facebook and Google have announced that they will collaborate to tackle fake news.

One possible step towards developing a policy to counter fake news is for these technology giants to publicly acknowledge the problems and control deficiencies associated with the widespread dissemination of fake news on their platforms. Alphabet, Google's parent company, has expressed its willingness to restrict manipulated information sites from using its ads for funding. Similarly, Facebook plans to pull its ads from sites it cannot verify as legitimate. While these measures may partially reduce the profitability of such ventures, they do not guarantee a complete eradication of the fake news problem.

Regardless of time and place, manipulative practices often play a dominant role in shaping public opinion. This can occur through:

- **A large volume of information:** Often, only a small percentage is important, with no clear distinction between truth and falsehood, or between what is important and what is not.
- **Information without emphasis:** Lack of focus or prioritization.
- **Flooding with superficial information:** Information is presented with little depth or substance.
- **Absence of scientific criteria:** Difficulty in distinguishing true from false or important from unimportant information.
- **Increasing dominance of electronic media:** The growing influence of digital platforms.
- **Advertising information:** Focuses attention on false emphases and bypasses rational analysis and reflection, using deep mechanisms beyond conscious control.
- **Infiltration of information:** Utilizes subconscious mechanisms.
- **Information based on imagination, fantasy, faulty logic, entrapment, etc.**

Action is needed to address the invasion of news with false information. Currently, solutions to combat fake news involve expert discussions and public debates about possible political controls at the European or local level.

Solutions to combating fake news often emerge from academic discussions and are echoed as suggestions by journalist associations. In the Bulgarian context, there are also effective practices, such as public debates and industry agreements, aimed at preventing and countering manipulated news.

Expert discourse suggests that addressing disinformation involves a mix of regulation, self-regulation, media education, and support for freedom of speech, which is considered a European democratic value.

Efforts to regulate fake news have been noted in the German media market. According to *Der Spiegel*, the government plans to establish a “Centre for the Protection against Disinformation.” In the Bundestag, there are calls for criminalizing the creation and dissemination of fake news.

Media self-regulation seeks to avoid state censorship by advocating solutions through public discussions involving governments, journalists’ organizations, media companies, social network representatives, and information verification platforms. The academic community proposes a long-term approach to tackling fake news through media education, media literacy, and enhancing the media culture of the audience.

A study by Alpha Research, commissioned by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, indicates that the majority of Bulgarians (72%) recognize fake news in the media. Those most susceptible to its influence are people from small towns and those with lower education levels. In Bulgaria, the impact of the global fake news epidemic is somewhat mitigated by the professional standards of television, which remains the primary information channel for 80% of the population. European legislation includes procedures for removing illegal content, but the challenge of fake news requires a new approach to optimization.

Whether the flow of fake news can be effectively curbed through political control remains an open question.

7. Conclusion

In today’s political environment, where information spreads at unprecedented speeds and through channels accessible to any electronic device, the political advisor must also excel as a communicator. The advisor needs to interact not only with the Minister and civil servants in daily operations but also to frame advice in a way that resonates with the general public. This includes anticipating reactions in both traditional and social media and developing effective communication strategies for engaging with these media and the public. In this rapidly evolving landscape, maintaining effective communication with diverse audiences is more crucial than ever.

The responsibilities of political advisors have expanded significantly in these circumstances. Twenty years ago (and even less so in our country), responsibility was often shared collectively, and information was heavily censored. Much of the political decision-making, and the corresponding advice, was inaccessible to the public. Today, however, political decisions are not only issued but also widely discussed and scrutinized.

The flow of information used to manipulate and create social and political crises must be controlled by institutions and organizations dedicated to maintaining a healthy information environment. There are technical solutions and applications designed to mitigate the impact of manipulated information that seeks to undermine social and political processes.

The political advisor's role encompasses managing this array of tools to perform duties effectively and contribute to the proper functioning of institutions.

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