



## REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

from Prof. D. Sc. Anguel Stefanov, corresponding member of BAS  
(*scientific position, academic degree, name, surname, educational / scientific institution*)

for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences.

with a dissertation on the topic: "DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE – THE MORAL SENSE OF COMMUNICATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES",

presented by Boris R. Stoyanov, full-time doctoral student in the Department "Communication, Relations with Society, and Advertisement" of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

with supervisor: prof. Nikolay Mihailov

### **I. Presentation of the doctoral (PhD) student / applicant on the basis of the submitted documentation**

Boris Stoyanov graduated from St. Kliment Ohridski" as Bachelor of Russian Philology and Public Communication in 2017. In 2018 he graduated from Lancaster University with a Master of Arts degree.

### **II. Assessment of the qualities of the text of the dissertation**

Boris Stoyanov's dissertation proposed for my review contains 174 pages, arranged in an Introduction, three Chapters and a Conclusion, divided into paragraphs.

I totally acknowledge the author's claim of the relevance of the dissertation topic, because the new situation in the field of information communication and political communication, which we are witnessing today in their accommodation in the various digital communication platforms, requires its urgent reflection on the part of ethical evaluations and regulations. As Boris Stoyanov summarizes in relation to a recent concrete case of manipulative expression on a digital information platform in our country, "political organizations purposefully adapt the flow of information for their own benefit, shaping the minds and perceptions, beliefs and behaviors of their supporters, while gaining new ones. All this is made possible by the functions provided by a given digital communication platform to target in detail and specifically the audience to receive the message. From there, the question arises as to the moral integrity of such an act and whether it is right to deal with... the fear of the population in this way" (p. 53 of the dissertation).

The introduction gives a clear idea of the nature of the research and its thematic distribution in the dissertation text. The problem of making sense of and dealing with moral regulations comes from the fact that the Internet space as a wide virtual medium for heterogeneous communications, including in the political sphere, provides freedom of speech. This fact, however, can be as helpful to information users as it is harmful in all those cases of deliberately pursued or accidentally transmitted misinformation, fake news and media manipulation.

This dual social role of freedom of speech is enormously strengthened on the Internet as the most comprehensive social medium for the dissemination of all types of information. This is why the author has found it appropriate in chapter one to highlight the most important technical possibilities for digital information communication, focusing on the specificity and functionality of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. The working concepts related to the aim of the dissertation, such as influencer, meme, podcast and the like, are also explained in a very relevant way. Alongside these

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The text in italics offers reference points for evaluating the research results. Recommended volume of the review - about 6-7 standard pages



technical clarifications and explanations, Boris Stoyanov also clarifies key aspects related to the dissertation topic by concisely discussing the nature and purposes of political discourse, as well as understanding what is a good or right action or reaction in terms of moral regulations.

The complexity and specificity of the task at hand is clearly presented on p. 68, after the analysis of Hristo Ivanov's appearance on the Facebook platform as an instant rebuttal: "is the role of the internet becoming too big in the supposedly serious field of political discourse? The answer could not be entirely unambiguous, alas, as this work aims to prove - the overall system of communication is changing at a relentless pace and soon the hitherto familiar politics will take on a substantially different shape."

Still at the beginning of chapter two B. Stoyanov manages to clearly show why the digital space today is beginning to take a leading position in the presentation of information, messages and the expression of positions compared to the familiar electronic and print media of the last and the beginning of our century. The explanation is based on the fact that the digital space provides much more options for direct and reverse communication between active politicians and consumers of their messages. "Unlike traditional media - the author explains - which are controlled to different degrees, decentralised communication through internet-based platforms not only provides the aforementioned freedom of expression, but also gives the possibility of instant interaction with the audience" (p. 91).

The possibilities of the online space in tailoring the messages of today's politicians either to their chosen target groups or to the general public are examined in detail. It is explained that this tailoring leads to a dropping of the formal aspects and behavioural rigour of political messages, in favour of a more free-form mode of expression, but focused on specific topics and situations. The presence of the parties that entered the 47th National Assembly and their leaders in the different digital platforms is presented and extensively commented, with the clarification that the number of followers of a political leader in these platforms does not coincide with the number of his supporters. The result of the author's observation of the degree of engagement of the different digital platforms with political messages in the country is that "the digital political communication situation develops mainly on Facebook" (p. 102). This is not an insignificant observation because it illuminates how today's virtualization of public communication is also changing the way politics is communicated in our country - from neglecting the content area of party ideologies and messages, towards an interest in the personal characteristics and manner of appearance of popular party leaders (p. 103). And so the conclusion the author reaches in this regard is not encouraging: 'The implication of this brief reading of approaches used to disseminate messages in the political paradigm would be that the mode of communication may influence the audience more than the content of the message itself, regardless of its value' (p. 109). And if this is true, then one could go on to reason that virtual communication in the public sphere of politics brings political actors closer to their audiences on the one hand, but on the other hand, obscures the content of their messages at the expense of a set of behavioural techniques that are external to them. And to the extent that traditional print and electronic media often refer to messages in digital media, it is reasonable to conclude that we are witnessing a visibly changing communication reality today.

In the third chapter Boris Stoyanov presents and analyses according to predefined criteria 20 examples of political and socially significant subjects as direct online messages to targeted users and the society in general. The nine statements preceding the examples are a meaningful and useful foreword to their fuller comprehension. The claims and observations presented in this chapter are adequately summarized within the conceptual frameworks of three distinct conceptual models.

The conclusion is a requisite final component of the dissertation. Based on the examples of different types of communication discussed in the dissertation, it is concluded that if political messages are directed by political actors to the mass audience, this type of online communication can be "vicious and unethical" (p. 148). On the contrary, if the online communication is between political subjects, then the possibility of manipulative techniques is sharply reduced, and a situation is then observed that could be beneficial for the mass audience to objectively judge who is the better off. In order to ensure reliable adherence to ethical principles and norms in the field of online political communication, the author posits that a code of ethics - analogous to that adhered to by PR professionals in their digital



dissemination of business information - should be followed. In this regard, the main tenets of such a code of ethics are presented.

The content of the dissertation is useful not only as a focus on a new object of study - contemporary communication between political actors, directed at individual users and societal groups, but also between themselves, situated in the environment of different digital platforms - but also as a relevant analysis of the new possibilities and practice of this kind of communication. In this regard, the ethical dimensions of political messages as a mode of persuasion and critical discourses are commented. In this respect, the study is thorough and comprehensive. The collection, processing and analysis of the empirical data have been done in a completely correct manner and with regard to previously stated evaluative criteria. The linguistic style used is clear and appropriate to the subject of the study, and relevant clarifications of the specific terminology used have been undertaken.

The abstract of the PhD thesis is fully consistent with the content of the dissertation.

I have no joint publications with the author of the thesis.

### **III. Contributions to the dissertation research**

I agree with the scientific contributions presented at the end of the Abstract of the PhD thesis.

### **IV. Notes and recommendations**

To the structure of the Introduction.

The object of the study is clearly outlined, but along the entirety of the Introduction, and not exactly in the corresponding section of the same section, where the emphasis is on the research activities undertaken, rather than on the explication of their own object of study. The thesis should be presented in a much more synthesized manner and should follow the Purpose, Objectives and Methods sections.

To chapter one.



On p. 66: we encounter the following conclusion: "online truth is a decidedly mysterious construct, from which it follows that credibility in its true form is almost impossible, since if it exists it would have to be a product of the individual's personal perceptions and therefore, tainted by internal beliefs." Here the author links credibility with online truth. This is the right move, but since the latter "is a categorically mysterious construct" and trust is "tainted by internal beliefs," we should trust neither online truth nor virtual messages. But then the point of adhering to ethical norms and regulations in online communication is lost altogether.

On p. 73 we read, "These examples demonstrate online influence techniques at a very basic level, with little or no editing, but at the same time illustrating respectively positive and negative ones for the key actors. Content on the internet should not be taken non-seriously because, as the previous observation made clear, in a country like Bulgaria, with a small population but a high percentage of internet users (78%), this type of content reaches many people directly and therefore, influences their perceptions of certain public figures and hence shapes their eventual political bias."

The examples given are from the Facebook platform regarding the presentation of the now former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov together with the US Ambassador during a visit to a construction site and the presentation of President Rumen Radev at an international economic forum. However, it is not clear why this "content on the Internet should not be taken frivolously" if it is not subject to manipulative interference and reflects real behaviour of political leaders? Is it not the large number of Bulgarians who use the internet who should not know about their behaviour? If the content has caricaturing interjections or saccharine comments, then yes, the author is right to maintain his opinion. But what is missing from his analysis is precisely an answer to the question of when and what to believe. To chapter two.

On p. 98 the important question of the authenticity of the representations of key politicians and presidents on digital platforms is raised: whether their words and messages are exactly their own or if they are modified by specialized teams, but the topic is not fully clarified and stands as a passing reference.

To chapter three.

Not all of the examples state an assessment of their ethical dimensions in identical manner.

On p. 130 the name of the Minister of e-Government is spelled once as Bozhidar Bozhanov and in the next sentence of the example as Boyan Bozhanov

## **V. Publications and participation in scientific forums**

Boris Stoyanov has presented two scientific publications - one in Bulgarian and one in English.

He has participated in seven scientific forums with papers or as a speaker.

The requirements of the Rules on the Conditions and Procedure for Acquiring Science Degrees and Holding Academic Positions in Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for approbation and disclosure of research results according to Article 5, item 5 and whether the minimum national requirements under Article 63, par. 1(4) and Art. 69, par. 3.

## **VI. Conclusion**

I will confidently vote "YES" for the award of PhD degree to Boris Stoyanov in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences.



Reviewer: Prof. D. Sc. Anguel Stefanov

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