



## REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

from Assoc. Prof. Stella Angova, PhD, UNWE, Media and Public Communication Department  
(*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: "EXPERT SPEAKING DURING CRISES AND THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF JOURNALISM",

presented by Elena Fuchedzhieva, full -time doctoral student in the Department Radio and Television of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication

with supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Zhana Popova, PhD

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

Elena Fuchedzhieva holds a BA in Journalism and an MA in Electronic Media and Rhetoric. She has taken courses in English and Korean. She has professional experience as a journalist, editor, PR specialist, analyst and mentor of students in the Student Internship Program. She has participated in several international projects, including conferences abroad, and exchanges through the Association of European Journalists. She is Associate Producer of a documentary for Al Jazeera World and author of a documentary short for China Television Global Network. He is a member of professional journalism organizations. She has been awarded by the JBJ and other organizations for thematic reporting.

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

The dissertation is 272 p. in pdf, of which 154 p. main text. The text is structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and 3 appendices. 98 sources in Bulgarian and English are cited. Authors present include Ulrich Beck, Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco, Walter Lippmann, Jean-François Lyotard, Neil Postman, Snezhana Popova, Zhanna Popova, Maria Popova, Ralitsa Kovacheva and others. The literature also contains surveys by Eurobarometer, Media Democracy Foundation, as well as references to dictionaries and encyclopedias such as Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Merriam-Webster and The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy can be seen cited.

A specific significant research problem is defined in the title of the dissertation. I interpret it in terms of responsibility, quality and knowledge - both of the journalists and the experts invited to comment. Journalists because they play a critical role as information brokers and expert recruiters. Experts, for their part, need to make precise and clear appeals and be authorities. Particularly in crisis situations, the two groups - journalists and experts - should cooperate in providing reasoned, objective and verified information. The author of the work asks a very logical question whether there are "criteria and rules for reactive anti-crisis behaviour in the media and whether (to what extent) in the moments of emerging crises we witness journalistic improvisations or pre-established rules of action in terms of

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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



expert knowledge" (p. 5). The search for answers runs through two major and unexpected crises, Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, in which journalists faced the problem of identifying and naming experts who could analyse what was happening in a logical and accessible way, while avoiding panicking audiences. One more argument in favour of the relevance of the work - the analysed crises, in my opinion, clearly showed that there is a problem with the expertise of the speakers, e.g. behaviour in front of the media, public speaking skills, use of arguments, credibility of data, etc. I.e. it was not clear whether the speakers really had specialised expertise and whether some of them were not legitimised just because they were responsive to journalistic calls on various issues.

In the introduction, the author has correctly developed the relevance of the topic, starting with the dynamism of contemporary crises, which "trigger a number of extraordinary mechanisms for working in the media, since in times of crisis journalism can reduce the risks of adverse developments or, on the contrary, exacerbate chaos, cause panic and misinformation" (p. 4). The object ("expert talk and the dimensions of expert knowledge in the three national television channels, as well as the image of experts who set the framework of expertise in the communication environment" - p. 7) and the object of the study ("the media approaches and the selection of interlocutors by journalists at Bulgarian National Television (BNT), Nova Television (NOVA) and bTV during pandemics and warfare" - p. 7). Four research tasks were set, which I report as completed:

- whether journalists have criteria for selecting experts in crisis and non-crisis moments;
- how journalists certify the expertise of their interlocutors;
- what are the different images of expertise that journalists use to select the audience to get the information they need during crises.
- what is the journalistic understanding of the parameters of expert knowledge and its bearers.

The formulation of the thesis is clearly composed, and I like the justification why in a crisis situation the critical function of journalism is questioned. At the beginning of crises there is a deficit of factual information and the media rely on experts to interpret what is happening. Several research hypotheses are presented and confirmed in the course of the analysis of the study.

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for the dissertation: a database of all experts interviewed in the first 24 hours in the three national TV stations (BNT, bTV, NOVA) at the announcement of the first case of Covid-19 infected in the country and the beginning of hostilities in Ukraine; interviews with 24 journalists; interviews with 7 experts. The selected methods allow the author to identify the experts who speak at the peak of crises (the first 24 hours of their occurrence), to examine what methods of legitimation of experts journalists use and how experts relate to the dissemination of expert knowledge in the media. I believe that in this way the dissertation is able to provide a broader picture of who is speaking, where they are speaking, how they are speaking and why they are speaking.

Chapter One is organized into the elucidation of theoretical propositions concerning knowledge and information. A number of authors are cited and analysed. This approach allows the author to differentiate terminologically the meaning of the concepts and thus to advocate a thesis with which I fully agree, namely, "Information and knowledge are closely related but not interchangeable. Before it acquires the characteristics of knowledge, information is a set of data. Processing it, transforming it



into meaningful form, and placing it in different discourses transforms that data into knowledge, and the people who are able to synthesize and use the data into the carriers of that knowledge" (p. 13).

This chapter makes logical connections and offers a critical reflection on a number of research developments (Davenport, Prusak, Schutz, Nichols, Buckland, Gadamer, etc.). In this way, the author is able to reach important results following the information-knowledge-expert-knowledge-expert-knowledge carriers-empirical evidence relationship. One can see the thoroughness of the clarification of the scientific discourse, the consequence of which is the differentiation of four groups of bearers of expert knowledge: experts, scientists, intellectuals, well-informed citizens. This part of the work also provides a historical traceability of the theses on the nature and importance of experts and the changing characteristics of expertise - the dynamics, in the author's words, has changed from reliability and truthfulness to recognition, popularity, acceptability.

As a consumer of expert information, I also agree with the observation that "this new type of expert is the bearer of well-tailored and widely advertised concise opinions that can then easily be used as 'expert knowledge' (e.g. by political leaders and advisors) in broad discourses" (p. 18). By analyzing the works of Bourdieu, Lyotard, Weber, Foucault, Beck, Mills, and others, the author goes into even greater depth, elucidating the characteristics of experts, the path of their becoming opinion leaders, power functions and relations, and ultimately the social and economic significance of their knowledge. The detailed elucidation of different research perspectives on who is an expert leads to another important part of the theory on the topic of this dissertation - crises, the critical function of journalism and social criticism.

I acknowledge that in this chapter the PhD student has critically analysed theoretical propositions and definitions, i.e. the proposed theoretical framework includes all important concepts relevant to the topic. This way allows for a smooth transition to the presentation of the research framework, empirical material collected and interviews.

Chapter Two offers the contextual framework of the media coverage and expert discourse of the two crises analysed - Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine. The registered media units enable an analysis of (1) how journalists select experts and (2) what legitimises these experts and how journalists choose who is an expert. The development of the crises in the first 24 hours and the reactions of three national TV stations (BNT, bTV and NOVA) in attracting experts are chronologically followed. Important findings are registered - contradictory messages, repetition of specific expressions, carriers of negativity and uncertainty. All collected information is also presented in tabular form, which allows to see even more clearly the main groups of speakers. The empirical evidence allows important conclusions to be drawn about the expertise of media commentators. It is excellent to see that within the emergence of crises, the media relies mainly on so-called formal opinion leaders and less on collective wisdom; it relies on the recognisability of commentators rather than their actual knowledge. In analysing the performance of the experts, the journalists' uncertainty about how to legitimise the guest as a bearer of expertise is evident.

Chapter Three analyses the responses of 24 journalists on how they go about selecting experts. A standardized interview was conducted which contained 9 questions. This research approach allows to identify the selection process. The questions were designed to verify the hypotheses. Learning about the answers and their analysis, I notice the following as problems in the work of the media: questionable criteria in the selection of individuals, unclear expertise, interest in populist or sensationalist theses, arrangements, political/corporate messages, etc.

Chapter Four closes the research inquiries with interviews with seven experts who offer their perspectives on the work of the media and their selection of spokespersons. The experts point to



political talk as a serious problem, shifting the focus, creating communication noise and, as a result, even misinformation on important issues.

The results of the analysis of the interviews and the empirical material show unequivocally that the dissertator has defined a relevant and significant topic, which has potential for further development. A



contemporary picture of an important part of the media's activity in terms of explaining topics of public importance and the availability of responsible experts is presented.

The abstract correctly conveys the content of the thesis.

### III. Contributions to the dissertation research

I fully accept the above contributions, and among the scientific and applied achievements of Elena Fuchedzhieva I could highlight the following:

(1) The dissertation has an original character, since the scientific interest is directed towards outlining a theoretical and applied framework by developing criteria for crisis reflection through the use of expert talk.

(2) A reasoned scholarly and applied account of the value of expert knowledge in crisis contexts is provided.

(3) The components of the critical function of journalism are outlined, and the need for a critical understanding of responsibility in the selection of spokespersons on specific topics is scientifically demonstrated.

(4) The dissertation asks important questions about the quality of the media environment in our country. Findings are made based on a study of a wide range of media, including those with national and regional coverage, polytopic and entertainment content.

(5) Problems and trends in media coverage of crises are outlined. This part of the work has real-world applicability and can be framed as a handbook for journalists and experts alike.

(6) The work is interdisciplinary and touches upon sciences such as philosophy, psychology, public communications, and media studies.

### IV. Notes and recommendations

The dissertation is complete and ready for publication, which is my recommendation to the dissertator. It will be of interest to a wide range of readers in academia, among the journalistic guild and among those who bring expertise.

My question relates to the idea of a group of researchers to draw up a list of responsible bearers of specific expertise and give it to the media to facilitate finding experts. What is your opinion as a researcher and practitioner - would such an approach work and would better analysis of crises follow?

### V. Publications and participation in scientific forums

The author has three publications on the topic of the dissertation, printed in specialized publications on the topic of the professional field.

### VI. Conclusion

The dissertation has all the necessary attributes and qualities of a scientific study. It has both theoretical and scientific and applied contribution. It enriches the media knowledge and the research approach allows to identify causal relationships. The results can help stakeholders in the application of professional standards and public interest work. I will therefore vote in favour of awarding Elena



Fuchedzhieva a PhD for her work on 'EXPERT SPEAKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF JOURNALISM'.

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Stella Angova,  
PhD

Date: 18/03/2024