



OPINION

from professor, DSc Svetla Koleva, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” (PhD) in professional field 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (PhD Program Media and Communications) with a dissertation on the topic: “Expert Speaking in Crises and the Critical Function of Journalism”, presented by Elena Gueorgieva Fuchedshieva, full-time doctoral student in the Department “Radio and Television” of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication with supervisor: Associate professor, PhD Zhana Popova

I. Evaluation of the qualities of the text of dissertation

Elena Fuchedzhieva’s dissertation is devoted to a problem of growing importance for both society and the journalistic profession. In the conditions of increasing crises of different scope and nature, the role of media in preventing situations of chaos and panic and preserving social peace by providing timely, accurate, verified and reliable information becomes crucial. This core professional and social mission of journalism is examined in the dissertation through the prism of expert knowledge, journalistic expert selection, and “reactive anti-crisis behavior in the media” (*Dissertation*, p. 5). The chosen research perspective allows 1) to gain knowledge (lacking so far) about the way Bulgarian media understand, justify and use expertise and 2) to start a debate about the social incorporation of expert knowledge through the interaction between journalists, experts and audiences, a debate with important implications for the formation of thoughtful individual and group behaviour.

By examining the media approaches and television content at BNT, bTV and Nova TV in the first 24 hours since the beginning of two crises (after the announcement of the first cases of Covid-19 infected in Bulgaria and the beginning of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine) Elena Fuchedzhieva aims to analyze the ways, rules and criteria for journalistic selection of experts and the consequences for the critical function of journalism. The research tasks and hypotheses are clearly defined and logically linked to the set goal. The overall structure of the dissertation is built in such a way that the theoretical model developed in Chapter One, based on a sound knowledge of the key concepts of knowledge, knowledge-power, expertise, crisis, and social critique, organizes meaningful research on media units (Chapter Two), journalists (Chapter Three), and experts (Chapter Four). Through a



methodology combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the main thesis and the formulated hypotheses on the journalistic use of expert knowledge as a resource against the risk of inaccurate information, on the legitimation of experts through the frequency of their media appearances, on the internal dynamics of the characteristics of expert knowledge (prevalence of public authority, recognition and personal qualities of the expert over the truthfulness and reliability of the knowledge) in the conditions of the crisis are substantiated and confirmed.

A distinctive feature of the PhD student's approach is the correct description of the research procedures and sources of information and the provision of primary data (see the three appendices), which indicates a formed scientific ethos of open and shared knowledge as a primary condition for critical debate and further development of scientific research on the research topic.

The present dissertation, with a total length of 272 pages, consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and three appendices. The exposition is clear, with adequate and precise use of scientific conceptual apparatus. The rare grammatical errors (full/incomplete articles) are due to omissions in the editing of the text. The abstract correctly and accurately reflects the content of the thesis and the results achieved. It has been prepared in accordance with the requirements.

II. Contributions of the dissertation research

The dissertation is a successful attempt to conceptualize, systematize and analyze the relationship between expert talk in the media during crises, on the one hand, and the critical function of journalism, on the other. Given that this particular focus has been absent from previous studies in the field of journalism in Bulgaria, the value of Elena Fuchedzhieva's dissertation research increases. Accepting the contributions formulated by the doctoral candidate, I would add three more achievements, important both in scientific-theoretical and scientific-applied terms:

First of all, Elena Fuchedzhieva shows the social construction of expert knowledge and the complexity of its legitimation as a result of social interactions between media and non-media institutions, of relationships within the journalistic guild, of communication interactions between journalists and experts, of the interference of factors of a purely subjective nature (such as recommendations from colleagues and friends, personal perceptions of charismatic, etc.). The dissertation does not simply reveal the role of the media in communicating expertise between holders and consumers but justifies the professional and social responsibility of the journalist in the media production of expertise. Moreover, it is by making explicit the internal



dynamics of the characteristics of expert knowledge in crisis that Elena Fuchedzhieva shows the zones of journalists' influence and the zones of institutional deficits or obstacles.

Second, the study of two crises of different natures allows to identify different figures of expertise and different bearers of expert knowledge (institutional experts, “well-informed citizens”, eyewitnesses, former/current politicians). The empirical material collected is a good basis for developing guidelines for the journalistic selection of experts to contextualize and explain crisis situations. Such benchmarks would not only facilitate the work of the journalist, but would provide professional guarantees for the performance of the informational and critical function of journalism, all the more so because when a crisis occurs, timely response and accurate selection of experts are crucial for informing citizens and forming public attitudes for rational, socially just and peaceful overcoming of the crisis situation.

Third, in the era of post-truth, generalized distrust towards institutions and media and institutionally defended pluralism of opinions, Elena Fuchedzhieva's dissertation demonstrates the importance of scientifically argued and validated knowledge for sound decision-making and the complexity of the journalistic task in identifying and broadcasting true, verified and reliable expert knowledge.

III. Notes and recommendations

In analyzing the different aspects of the problem Elena Fuchedzhieva herself draws possible directions for further work. This critical self-assessment and research imagination lead me to suggest several more lines of reflection that would deepen the analysis.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation research would be denser and more solid if the knowledge-opinion, truth-utility relations of knowledge were considered, insofar as different registers of validity of a statement are concerned. Precisely because the functioning of knowledge as “practically true” expresses and confirms its social validity, expert talk blurs the boundaries between objectively valid truth and practical utility.

The substantive richness of the dissertation would be greater if media audiences were included in the analysis. It remains the missing link in the journalists-experts-politicians-power structures relationship, even though the journalistic, expert, political, managerial message is



aimed at it. Media audience research would also be a litmus test for the critical function of journalism.

Problematising journalists as experts (even if only in terms of their expertise to identify experts) would be an interesting angle of future research.

Future publications on the subject would do well to avoid repeating quotes from the same experts.

IV. Publications and participation in scientific forums

All publications presented by the PhD student (two published, one in print) are related to the dissertation, address issues developed in the dissertation, and carry the author's thinking and research style. Both the publications and the dissertation are the work of the doctoral student; the cognitive results and achievements preclude any plagiarism.

The materials presented by Elena Fuchedzhieva, related to the dissertation work and the conducted training, are in accordance with the *Regulations on the conditions and procedure for the acquisition of scientific degrees and occupation of academic positions at the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"*, Art. 5, point 5 and confirm that the minimum national requirements under Art. 63, par. 1, point 4 and Art. 69, par. 3 are met.

V. Conclusion

On the basis of the aforementioned qualities, achievements and research results of the dissertation "Expert Speaking during Crises and the Critical Function of Journalism" authored by Elena Georgieva Fuchedzhieva, I confidently and categorically **propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor"** to Elena Georgieva Fuchedzhieva in the professional field 3.5 Public Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Radio and Television).

Jury member:

Svetla Koleva, Professor, DSc

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