



REVIEW

from **Prof. Dr. Habil. Snezhana Borissova Popova, SU “S^t Kliment Ochidski”**

for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications – Radio and Television)

with a dissertation on the topic: “EXPERT SPEAKING IN TIMES OF CRISES AND THE CRITICAL FUNCTION OF JOURNALISM”,

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

with supervisor: **Assoc. prof. Dr. Zhana Popova**

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

Elena Fuchedzhieva was born in Kazanlak in 1983. She holds a BA in Journalism and an MA in Electronic Media from the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication and an MA in Rhetoric from the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University. She has worked as a journalist at BNT and Nova TV and as a PR specialist. As a regular PhD student of Assoc. Zhana Popova at the Department of Radio and Television, she focused her scientific interest on the issues of expert participation in the media and the journalistic role in the presentation of expert knowledge. Her publications are in this research field.

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

The work is distinguished by a good structure and well organized content. It is spread over 272 pages, 107 of which are appendices that contain the empirical material of the study and constitute an integral part of the work that interprets it in a multifaceted way. It is organized into four chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The bibliography contains 98 sources – 37 in Bulgarian and 61 in English.



Relevance and significance of the problem developed in the dissertation

The dissertation poses an important problem for society – the participation of expertise in the media presentation of social processes. The issue of media expertise is often discussed at all levels, including the level of everyday talk around journalistic professionalism and media policies. Accusations, often not without foundation, are directed in two directions. Elena Fuchedzhieva dares to join this conversation with a scientific study that "exacerbates" the problem by placing it in the context of a crisis. Among the merits of the work can be placed the very centering of the research on media behavior, seen in the focus of journalistic work with expert knowledge. How the experts who form the public's first ideas about what happens in crisis situations are chosen is the leading research question, the answers of which lead the author to reasoned conclusions and generalizations.

The study of theoretical sources

The PhD student builds a solid theoretical foundation for her thesis in chapter one, where she clarifies a number of important concepts in her search for the formula of "expertise". I have every reason to express satisfaction with this section, where important distinctions are present – scientific and non-scientific knowledge, scientists and intellectuals, experts and counter-experts, man in the street, expert and well-informed citizen, power and knowledge, public opinion and specialist opinion, etc. The author is familiar with the work of Weber, Schutz, Bourdieu, Foucault, Lyotard, Wright Mills, Beck and many others, whose work consistently affirms the idea of the social construction of expert knowledge and the need for critical attitude towards it. Particular emphasis is placed on the distinction of the expert from the intellectual, and on the dangers of using cultural capital for confirmation of social inequalities. The set of ideas and distinctions allows Fuchedzhieva to outline the specific features of the expert among the main groups of knowledge carriers in the media – experts, scientists, intellectuals and well-informed citizens.

With the same precision, the doctoral student traces the definitions of crisis through the texts of a number of scientists, including Bulgarian researchers, emphasizing the critical function of journalism – a theme laid out in the title of the dissertation. The focus here is on Michael Walzer's views on detached viewing as a constitutive position of critical viewing. The views on



the critical position of the Bulgarian authors are presented (Deyanova, Znepolski B.), naturally an important researcher here is Zhana Popova with her specific studies of crises and the behavior of the media, pressured by various factors and institutions. The theoretically derived aspects of the topic of expertise in the media are present in one form or another in the subsequent analysis, where a number of topical interpretations are made based on the empirical material.

Setting of the research, adequacy of methods

The author's aim to study the functioning of the concept of “expertise” in the media predetermines the research choices made. The choices of media and of crises are precisely targeted: the three major television stations addressing mass audiences, and the two large-scale crises – Covid19 and the war in Ukraine. In both cases, the statements of the experts who participated in the programmes of the selected media were subsequently circulated and can be defined as influential.

The media content is fully studied: by registering/coding all participations (excluding repetitions) of commentators announced by journalists as carriers of expertise and important information – in interviews, comments and officially disseminated opinions. Attention deserves the period chosen for follow-up – the first 24 hours of, respectively, March 8, 2021 and February 24, 2022. Such a choice could raise doubts, but in this case it can be assessed as good for two reasons: 1. Under such a restriction, all occurrences of specialists presented as experts can be taken for analysis without applying additional selection criteria; 2. In its first 24 hours, the Covid crisis has already been defined by the WHO as an infodemic, the main visions that will subsequently be debated for a long time and even to this day have been embodied and appeared; On the first day of the war in Ukraine, the names “military operation” and “war” already enter into a fight, from which some still do not give up today. (However, the salience of the first 24 hours could probably be sought and confirmed in certain types of crises, and this would be research and methodologically valuable.)

Chapters three and four of the dissertation extend the research optics by analysing information systematised through interviews. By incorporating this research method, certain and already derived content characteristics of expert presence in the media are put in relation to their meaning-making by journalists and experts. The demands made in the two directions are



systematized and juxtaposed. Journalists' self-reflection becomes the basis for generalizations around professional approaches to the selection of interlocutors; experts' views provide insights into problem areas in communication with journalists.

Results of the analysis; conclusions

In the course of the analysis, the author formulated many and interesting results. I highlight here the most significant of these, which relate both to the media studied and, more broadly, to media practices with expertise in general.

The dissertation makes explicit the relationship between the expert interpretation, launched by the broad-based media, and the traditional (far from only for this media) orientation towards the established and the known – towards representatives of the institutions and mainly towards experts legitimized in the public space. The author convincingly proves her hypotheses: in search of “safe” information, in a crisis situation, journalists actually act out of habit and do not “seek” certain expertise, but provide expertise obtained according to the laws of routine and randomness. This expertise the author calls “partial” – expertise based on affiliation and social reputation, where popularity can trump trustworthiness and credibility. Another aspect of the analysis deserves special attention: in the emerging picture, there is a breeding ground for the so-called “new type of experts”, producers of “noisily published short 'opinions'” that rival the official expertise.

Among the analytical conclusions falls the clarification of the place of the journalist-commentator – as an intellectual, able to speak critically, but without ceasing to be a player in the communication field. The participation of politicians, always active by default, and of the well-informed citizen, present in the media mainly as an eyewitness, is appreciated. The practice of parties and organisations of contracting “information services”, gaining the right to determine the experts who will speak on certain issues to the media, is critically assessed.

I consider as important and worthy of follow-up in perspective the launched typology of the experts, accompanied by sketching their images. Figures of non-institutional experts, politically committed experts, journalists-commentators in the position of intellectuals, etc. are outlined.



They most clearly reinforce the images of the “institutional expert” in the Covid crisis and of the “former” expert (“belonging to the past of an institution”) when commenting the war in Ukraine (and other similar events). A number of conclusions in the dissertation suggest follow-up in future research.

For the purpose of the review here, I would summarize as follows: the PhD student convincingly shows expert talk in the media as mostly dominated by subjectivity – by the subjective judgments of the journalist and the subjective aspect of knowledge, prioritizing not the knowledge itself, but its “bearer”. Through her work, the PhD student participates in the important discussion about the potential of the media to understand and explain the world, resisting the inertias that make them complicit in the uncritical “forging” and “cultivation” of authorities.

Qualities of the autoref

The abstract has a volume of 31 pages with the bibliography and is in full accordance with the text. I find it informative and comprehensive.

III. Contributions to the dissertation research

I accept the contributions formulated by the author as they correspond to the qualities of the dissertation as I see them.

The work contributes to the definition of the concept of “expert knowledge” by situating it in the context of public communication in times of crisis.

A productive research approach is applied that provides a multidimensional view of media expertise and thus reveals unexplored aspects in the relationships between key actors in public debate.

The dissertation establishes and interprets changes in the notion of a critical function of journalism in conditions of crises on the scale of a pandemic and war.



The criteria elaborated by the PhD student for media reporting crises with the means of expert participation are among the practical and applied contributions of the work. I would add that all information, gleaned through the interviews with journalists and experts, is of great practical use to the media.

IV. Notes and recommendations

When editing the work after the preliminary defense, the recommendations made were taken into account. The notes in general were mainly related to the presentation of the research results. The research procedures are more clearly explained and the information obtained through them is presented in a much clearer way. A better interpenetration of the theoretical and analytical part is noticed and this increases the quality of the text.

Although in her publications the PhD student reports information obtained through interviews with journalists and experts, I would recommend publishing more texts making sense of the results of the applied two-way research optics. New publications would allow the deployment of the findings in the broader context of media practices with expertise and would multiply the practical-applied effects of the work. Both professional journalists and other actors in public discourse have an interest in the issues discussed here.

V. Publications and participation in scientific forums

Elena Fuchedjieva has published three articles on the topic of her dissertation in the scientific publications “Medialog” and “Seminar BG”. The titles indicate that the main results of the dissertation research have been made public. The submitted report on the implementation of the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of the ZRAS of the Republic of Bulgaria indicates that the requirements have been met.



VI. Conclusion

Elena Fuchedzhieva's dissertation has all the qualities of an up-to-date and thoroughly developed scientific work. A high level of knowledge of the literature in the field of study and research skills in the collection, summarization and interpretation of original empirical material are demonstrated. The work is an entirely independent achievement and contains scientific and practical contributions

All this gives me grounds to support the award of the **PhD in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Radio and Television)** to **ELENA GEORGIEVA FUCHEDZHIEVA**.

Date: 14 March 2024

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. Habil. Snezhana Popova