

## OPINION

From Assoc. Prof. Mladen Vlashki, Ph.D.,

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for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) in professional field **3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Mass Culture)**

with a dissertation on the topic: "**The prospects for the magazine as a media platform in a time of transformations of the paper press. Strategies of quality Bulgarian-language magazines at the beginning of the 21st century**",

presented by **PANAYOT KRASIMIROV STEFANOV**, full-time doctoral student at the Department of Press Journalism and Publishing at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

with supervisor: **Assoc. Professor Georgi Lozanov**

### I. Evaluation of the qualities of the text of dissertation

I would like to start my opinion with the biographical fact that Panayot Stefanov is the publisher and editor-in-chief of the Magazine Nula32, which has been published since 2015 and has so far produced 36 issues. In connection with this fact, the dissertation work provided is apparently born from a combination of practical questions and a search for theoretical foundations and answers that can also be applied in practice. It is the product of an organic combination of theory and practice, which on the one hand determines its goals, and on the other, in relation to them, the structure and content of both the research on the topic and its exposition. The topic is current and little studied in our country in view of the global transformation from paper media carriers to electronic ones (in our country there is a predominant interest in electronic media or in the mass press). The object of research - "the transformations in press journalism caused by the convergence of media models and their impact on the typological group of magazines" is structurally located in "the study of the strategies of existence of Bulgarian-language magazines", which "is exclusively interested in the segment of qualitative magazines intended for the general public, also called "consumer" (Abstract, p. 8ff.). The author clearly notes the

efforts of his predecessors in the thematic circle (p. 27). The research questions related to the thus focused topic are clearly formulated: what are the results of the transformative process so far; how the attitude of the public is reshaped in it, i.e. is there a need for journals and how they could be financed under the new economic frameworks of the transformation process. The chosen methodology is also clearly named: a theoretical overview related to an attempt to abstract criteria for evaluating journals; empirical studies on Bulgarian terrain; analytical observations on 11 specific cases, subject to two hypotheses related to the quality of the journalistic product and the specific features of the magazine (the totality of which the author calls "paper premium" p.11 and p.111). In this scientific-constructive prism, the three pillars of the structure stand out precisely: transformations; quality; economics of the paper magazine.

The dissertation is 312 pages long and contains: introduction, five chapters, conclusion, bibliography and appendices. The bibliography includes a total of 204 sources, of which 106 are in Cyrillic and 98 in Latin, an own empirical study was conducted using the semi-standardized interview method with open questions and case studies, 2 tables are included (the one on p.140 is a quote), 10 diagrams (between p. 123 and p. 129 as part of the presentation of the general picture of the Bulgarian print media in the period 2000 - 2022; the sources of the data are indicated, but not whether the diagrams are quotes) and 4 graphic displays. This structure is clear, transparent and correctly subordinated to the chosen methodology, which is a clear sign of a very good scientific research level, which also finds an adequate genre expression. For me, a particularly good move is the use of the standardized interviews to assess the specific analyzed cases (11 in number) to what extent the theoretical models are applicable in the specific Bulgarian environment. Also of importance is the author's position in defense of the paper platform, which is scientifically based and outlined in clear perspectives that could serve as a basis for certain cultural policies in Bulgaria.

The introduction and conclusion precisely frame the research and its exposition.

The **first chapter** offers a theoretical framework for the subject of the study by formulating a working definition of "magazine" and traces the three aspects of this media platform – journalistic content, the magazine as a thing and the magazine as a type of business venture. Sharing the view that the content of a magazine is not the set of texts in it, but also the result of the creative activity of its implementation as a paper "thing" (typography, images, graphic solutions, polygraphy), the author considers magazines "as the most creative field in press journalism, including in today's hybrid environment." Appropriate attention is given to the relationship between editorial and business processes. The conclusion strongly argues that "the

media market does not function as a regular quality regulator" (p.66), and its achievement is based on other mechanisms.

In the **second chapter**, the focus of attention turns to quality journalism. Seven concepts were reviewed. Their observations are placed in the context of understanding the use of language, the observance of ethical standards and the importance of journalism for democracy. In view of the nature of the magazine as a media carrier, eight basic indicators of the quality magazine have been abstracted from the international discussion on quality journalism (p. 97).

**Chapter three** moves on to observations of the 'digital turn' and the transformations of the paper press. As a counterpoint to the acceleration caused by the digital revolution and its consequences in the direction of hyperamounts of information, interpretations and readings, the promotion of "deep reading on paper" is considered, which is understood as a chance for the magazine to rediscover its dimensions as a medium of more educated circles who are ready to consciously avoid "digital noise" and seek slow and in-depth journalism (p.112).

In the thus developed theoretical and historical context, the **fourth chapter** is laid, which is the most voluminous and first of all develops the general picture of the "new press" in Bulgaria in the period from 2000 to 2020. As the reasons for the deformations in it, the author points to the lack of transparency in the quality and effectiveness metrics, the redirection of advertising interest, the concentration of media ownership and the associated loss of trust from the readership. The second part of the fourth chapter is devoted to the analytical observations on 11 editions emblematic of the subject of the dissertation, and the third (Operationalization) based on the rich information acquired from the research analysis makes a successful attempt to synthesize through the main recurring motifs the encounters and divergences between theory and Bulgarian practice in the observed period. The working hypothesis is proven that the shortcomings of the magazine as a media platform according to the so-called qualities according to the understanding of current information conditions are in fact its greatest advantages - it is precisely the magazine that offers length, a calm pace, thoroughness and subjectivity of communication.

The **fifth chapter** outlines the current strategic problems and prospects for the Bulgarian quality consumer magazines, with the prospects being seen in a positive aspect precisely in view of the advantages of the magazine brought out in the previous chapter, which have the potential to connect with new socio-psychological, socio-cultural and financial mechanisms through the new "new" generations precisely thanks to compensatory motivations against technostress,

against the loss of the sense of community in online communication, against the disturbed information balance, against hyperinterpretation, etc. The outlook envisages "investment in quality authored content, purposeful development of the arena of opinion that creates trust, winning "new" new audiences for well-forgotten old media, promoting the conversation about journalistic entrepreneurship that abandons the central role of advertising and expands the horizon for budget diversification in achieving the long-term financial sustainability of a media organization, the idea of creating a centralized fund for quality press and the need for legislative initiatives in recognizing the press as a "collective good" (p. 227). Due attention is paid to the business models for the existence of such kind of media carriers, and both the benefits and the dangers of a kind of "project financing" through a "fund for quality journalism" are argued. The subject of regulations is also touched upon, and the analytical observations lead the author to a statement that I share in essence: "While the state is experimenting with chaotic constructions, the Bulgarian press is slowly but surely retreating from its positions, becoming a bargaining chip of political oligarchs. The dividing lines between the publications and the class organizations in the guild, the progressively decreasing circulations and weakening public influence largely render the political conversation about a new legislative initiative in support of the press meaningless, which would be more and more difficult to justify to the citizens" (p. 222ff.).

The conclusion correctly summarizes the content of the dissertation work.

## II. Contributions of the dissertation research

One of the essential contributions of the dissertation is the situating of the old problems of quality, ethics and funding in recommunication based on the media platform paper magazine in a fundamentally new context, predetermined by the development of digital technologies in the modern world. The digitization of public communication requires new conceptual journalistic strategies, which can be realized precisely through the "paper premium". The dissertation is dedicated to a problem that has not been sufficiently investigated in Bulgaria until now and enriches existing theories with its analysis. Case analysis, used as the main method in the dissertation, adds the necessary concrete applicability to the main theses.

The abstract precisely and maximally summarizes the subject of research (with the necessary limitations), the methodology, the goals and tasks, the hypotheses, the content, the strategic problems and their perspectives, as well as the scientific contributions of the work, which I fully share.

### III. Notes and recommendations

My notes are mainly focused on formal dimensions. Some places need proofreading. Not only because of some grammatical errors, but also because of omissions such as the following: on page 109, a study by Al. Kiosev is cited and as a quote the phrase *paper reading and digital reading do not interfere with each other or compete, but complement each other* (without being formally formatted as a quote and without a period at the end of the sentence) - on page 111ff. the same phrase has already been repeated as the author's. When publishing the work, in order to save paper, it is appropriate to change the way of citation to the more economical "inside the text".

### IV. Publications and participation in scientific forums

From the publications on the subject, it is clear that Panayot Stefanov participated in scientific forums and projects, but they are not categorically described. The candidate also has the required number of publications on the topic of the dissertation. This fulfills the requirements of the Regulations for the terms and conditions for acquiring scientific degrees and holding academic positions at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" and the minimum national requirements specified in the Appendix to Art. 1a, para. 1 of the RULES FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LAW ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC STAFF IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA (even if the carriers specified in item 6 belong to item 7, which I cannot judge).

### V. Conclusion

The dissertation impresses with its position, with the scientific research and with the obtained research results and discussion arguments. Bearing in mind Panayot Stefanov's in-depth knowledge and practice in the field of press journalism, I strongly recommend to the respected members of the scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Panayot Krasimirov Stefanov for his dissertation on the topic: "Perspectives for the magazine as media platform in a time of paper press transformations. Strategies of quality Bulgarian-language magazines at the beginning of the 21st century" by professional direction 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications - Mass Culture).

Because of all the above, I state clearly and unequivocally that I am voting "YES".

Date: 28.08.2024

Jury member: Assoc. Prof. Mladen Vlashki Ph.D.