



OPINION

from **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mariya Plamenova Nikolova, University of National and World Economy** for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" (PhD) in professional field 3.5. **Social Communications and Information Sciences (Public Relations)** with a dissertation on the topic: "*Global Changes in PR: Effective Social Media Management*", presented by Maxim Moncho Behar, free doctoral student in the Department "Communications, Public Relations and Advertising" of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication **with supervisor: Prof. D.Sc. Lubomir Dimchev Stoykov**

I. Evaluation of the qualities of the text of dissertation

The dissertation addresses a highly relevant and significant transitional moment in the field of Public Relations (PR), examining the profound impact of digital transformation, particularly social media, on the PR industry. The research subject and objectives are well-defined and have been achieved throughout the course of the study. Despite the innovative angle of the topic, the author has effectively summarized well-known theoretical concepts, definitions, and models of PR developed by Grunig, Hunt, Haywood, Cutlip, Broom, Black, Todor Petev, Lyubomir Stoykov, Zdravko Raikov, and others. The dissertation is based on both classical and contemporary sources, encompassing foundational as well as new theories in PR, leadership, and digital communications. In the dissertation, these theories are, to some extent, enhanced by conclusions drawn from modern situational studies of global industry organizations and communication companies. The dissertation advances existing theories through empirical research that demonstrates how social media is reshaping leadership, competencies, and responsibilities of communication specialists.

The dissertation methodology combines qualitative and quantitative empirical methods — two surveys involving Bulgarian and foreign PR specialists, expert interviews, and case study analysis. The inclusion of in-depth interviews with global PR leaders helps validate pre-existing assumptions about the profession's transformations within the contemporary PR landscape. The author's approach to defining PR, based on his direct international communication experience, is noteworthy. The dissertation introduces certain "avant-garde" concepts, aligned with the evolutionary nature of public communications, such as real-time PR and the "rhizomatic" structure of social media, which are part of the research hypotheses. Maxim Behar presents definitions, models, and theoretical generalizations primarily from foreign authors, cited and systematized accurately. This also applies to data from studies conducted by professional organizations in the PR field, which are interpreted through the author's professional experience. In this regard, the collection and analysis of empirical data are methodologically sound. The empirical base, especially the interviews with the one hundred global experts, contributes to the authority of the research presented in the dissertation.

It is impressive that Maxim Behar compares the responses from five years ago with current answers, further substantiating the study's findings on the current realities of the industry. I also highly appreciate the surveys conducted from January to April 2024 with both Bulgarian and international communication experts, clearly demonstrating the dominance of social media in the evolutionary changes in PR. The dissertation highlights and argues new findings on the role of social media in transforming leadership and communication within PR. These conclusions reflect how the profession adapts to the specifics of the digital environment. The dissertation also confirms well-established principles, especially regarding



professional ethics in PR, while describing how the profession's values are being challenged and reevaluated with the advent of artificial intelligence.

The dissertation contains 185 references, including books, publications, and studies by both Bulgarian and foreign authors in the fields of public communications, communication management, leadership, social media, and more, which are more than sufficient. The dissertation is structured into an introduction, four chapters, general conclusions, a bibliography, and appendices, totaling 180 pages (excluding appendices). The abstract corresponds to the structure and content of the dissertation.

The research is logically consistent, with each chapter building upon the conclusions of the previous one. The sources are correctly and precisely cited in footnotes. The language and writing style, while not entirely academic, are comprehensible.

II. Contributions of the dissertation research

I consider the topic of the dissertation to be fundamental, as it raises important questions about the transformations in the profession at both strategic and operational levels and has a bold predictive character with various horizons — the author unequivocally states how he believes new technologies, particularly social media, will completely transform the profession. The dissertation makes an innovative contribution to the field of Public Relations by examining the impact of digital transformation and social media on specific PR practices. Specifically, Maxim Behar offers new theoretical perspectives, such as the concept of "real-time" PR, which reflects the dynamic and decentralized nature of digital PR.

I admire the author's approach to analytically assess and critically accept or reject theoretical definitions of PR through the lens of his own professional experience. I consider this approach important because it enriches the existing knowledge of the business rather than reiterating already established concepts. Through empirical data from his own research, the author adds depth and relevance to classical understandings of PR in light of the challenges posed by social media and communication in areas such as campaigns, crisis management, and brand positioning.

The results of the dissertation have direct practical relevance because they are based on real experience. Through the analysis of specific practical examples (case studies) and the formulation of recommendations, Maxim Behar provides useful guidance to PR specialists navigating the social media landscape, helping them better understand the importance of leadership in a digital environment and the need for transparency, honesty, and responsibility in communications. The research results support the practical application of new strategies for social media communication, raising the question of PR specialists' ability to adapt to ever-evolving digital technologies and platforms.

I accept the contributions outlined by the author in the dissertation as they are significant and important for both theory and practice. The author's hypotheses have been tested through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods applied in the dissertation.

Maxim Behar has three scientific publications, which are entirely sufficient. However, the nine books he has written, covering various topics touched on briefly or partially in the dissertation, are impressive. This enhances the academic and professional authority of the dissertation research.

The potential for utilizing the scientific results exists in both academic and practical spheres. The research findings outline topics that serve as a foundation for further academic studies in digital communication, media relations, social media communication management, the leadership role of PR experts, and ethical and professional standards in practice. Communication specialists can directly apply



this knowledge in planning and managing communications in a digital environment. I would also add that the results of the dissertation are important for communication students, as they synthesize the essential skills needed for a professional to succeed.

III. Notes and recommendations

The dissertation requires stylistic editing and removal of repetitions. The translations from English are sometimes unclear and do not sound fluent in Bulgarian. Additionally, there could have been more theoretical summaries — in recent years, many new books on digital PR and communications in social media have been published. There are also valuable studies on AI and its application in PR by major agencies and companies that offer PR software (such as Muck Rack, Semrush, etc.). Also, the conclusions at the end of the dissertation cannot compensate for the lack of a solid and quality conclusion. On the contrary, I believe that the dissertation, and specifically the author's work on the core research, is somewhat undervalued due to its absence. This also applies to the “rushed” summaries of such important and valuable survey data and expert interviews — these deserve a more thorough analysis of the responses and results.

IV. Publications and participation in scientific forums

Maxim Behar has presented three publications on the topic of the dissertation — one in the academic journal "Media and Public Communications" and two in collections from doctoral conferences at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication (FJMC). It is also noteworthy that he has nine books that indirectly reference the topic of the dissertation. The requirements of the Regulations for the conditions and procedure for acquiring academic degrees and holding academic positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" have been met for the validation and dissemination of research results, according to Art. 5, item 5, and the minimum national requirements under Art. 63, para. 1, item 4, and Art. 69, para. 3 have been covered.

V. Conclusion

The mentioned remarks and recommendations do not diminish the merits of the dissertation presented for public defense. The achievements and contributions of Maxim Behar in the PR business in Bulgaria and worldwide are impressive, and his role as chairman, member, and part of the board of directors of various professional and industry organizations in Bulgaria and abroad is indisputable. I would also like to highlight his participation as a lecturer for Public Relations students at numerous universities. All of this gives me grounds to cast a positive vote for awarding the academic degree "Doctor" in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Public Relations) to Maxim Moncho Behar for his dissertation titled "Global Changes in the PR Business: Effective Management of Social Media."

Jury member:

Date: 12.11. 2024 г.