



Centre for Film & Media Studies

University of Cape Town · Private Bag · Rondebosch 7701 · South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)21 650-3373
Fax: +27 (0)21 650-4828
Website: www.cfms.uct.ac.za

External Examiner's Report: Nenasheva, Anna Vitalyevna

Thesis title: "Media Confidence in Modern Russia"

Supervisor: Professor D. Gavra

Examiner: Professor Herman Wasserman

Thank you for the opportunity to read this interesting thesis. I base my comments below on a reading of the synopsis provided in English, due to my inability to read Russian. I understand this to be a shorter version of the thesis submitted in Russian, with inevitable gaps and truncations, and accept that there will also be some meaning lost in the translation. As such, my remarks are offered as impressions and suggestions rather than a conclusive examination.

The central topic of the study, 'media confidence', can also be translated to 'trust'. The issue of trust in the media is highly relevant internationally at the moment, especially given the proliferation of digital media platforms where information is circulated widely and rapidly, with the consequences of firstly an increased likelihood of journalists compromising on standards such as accuracy, and secondly an decrease in trust in the media by audiences, linked also the rise of phenomena such as 'fake news' and the 'post-truth' society. The specific focus this thesis offers on the situation of media trust in Russia therefore is a welcome addition to the international literature on the topic, as it provides a case study of a particular country that has also dealt with other challenges such as the transition to post-authoritarianism, the rise of digital media and the country's geopolitical repositioning including its membership of the emerging group of BRICS nations. The study builds on media systems theory research as exemplified by e.g. Hallin & Mancini's work, as well as journalism studies research, e.g. Hanitzsch. A broad range of literature has been used to construct the theoretical framework, although the framework could have benefited from more comparisons with other BRICS countries. It was especially interesting to read about the Russian regulatory environment which requires websites and blogs to be registered if they exceed a certain number – it would be interesting to compare the resulting confidence levels and levels of audience participation with that in other countries.

The study's particular aim is to construct categories within which to examine media confidence, and then to analyse the reasons and motives for low levels of trust in the media in contemporary Russia, over a ten-year period (1996-2016). Among these reasons that were examined include the changes in the media-political system and social and demographic factors. The aim of constructing a typology of media confidence arising from this case study is a good one, as this would provide a basis for further comparative work in future beyond the particularities of the Russian context. The study pays careful attention to matters of definition

of the notion of 'confidence' as it exists specifically in the Russian academic literature. The point of departure is that there are different types of confidence, and that confidence in societal institutions, of which the media forms one, is more than just a sum of personal levels of confidence, but exists on a supra-individual level. This is an important point of view from which confidence in the Russian media can be examined in relation to broader factors of politics, economics and society. A somewhat bold claim is made that trust in the media may be directly related to trust in political institutions. This raises the question whether audiences might not trust media more as an independent voice when their trust in political institutions start to wane, and about the extent to which media and politics as seen as linked, rather than independent from each other. These issues may require more nuanced analysis of the empirical data available. An interesting finding from the overview of existing surveys was that there seems to be a gradual increase in trust in the Internet among middle-class and educated audiences.

The above engagement with current global topics in journalism and media studies from a particular contextual perspective, namely that of Russia (and, more specifically, St Petersburg) is the thesis' strong point. As such, the thesis offers provocative statements for further exploration and for future research to build on.

There are however also several weak points.

The first weakness has to do with the integration theory and findings. Given that the thesis starts off with an overview of media systems theory, the thesis would have ended much stronger if the candidate returned to this theory after outlining the findings, so as to compare the Russian media system with those outlined in the existing media systems literature. In this way, an opportunity is missed for the thesis to provide a more substantial critique of the literature.

The second, more important, weakness, has to do with the methodology. For the largest part, the thesis summarises and synthesises secondary data (existing sociological surveys) to draw a picture of the situation of media trust in Russia in recent years. The only primary data consists of 48 interviews with journalists. While these interviews were in-depth and yielded interesting insights, they should ideally have been combined with further primary research such as the author's own interviews or focus groups with audiences to gauge the level of trust among audiences.

The major findings as outlined in the conclusion seem to suggest that levels of trust in the Russian media remain overall high, despite some decline over the course of decades since the 1980s. This is interesting and surprising in the global context, where trust in media seem to have declined internationally. However, given the limitations of the study outlined above, this should be only a starting point for future empirical research that could use this study as a point of departure to widen the scope.

Lastly some technical aspects – if the thesis synopsis or an article is to be published in English, more editing and proofreading would be required. The referencing system was unknown to me and I could therefore not comment on whether this was in line with the university's requirements.

Thank you again for the opportunity to read this work. I hope the above comments will be helpful to the examinations committee as they deliberate on the outcome of the submission.

