

External Review

of the Master Thesis

Written by Student Maïke Verlaat (program “Global Communication and International Journalism, Year of study 2018)

Reviewer’s full name and academic degree

Ilya Kiriya, Ph.D. information and communication, PhD in philology, professor of the School of Media, National Research University Higher School of Economics

Topic of the term paper:

The Portrayal of Russia in US Media Following the 2016 Election Hacking Scandal

Review: (1,5-2 pages)

The paper is devoted to the analysis of the image of Russia in United States after the 2016 Election Hacking Scandal. Such topic in current situation seems to be very relevant either in topicality of this agenda (the role of Russia in Trump’s victory and ability of the country to influence the result of the US elections is often discussed in general media, by different analysts etc) or in scientific research in field of communication studies (generally the conflicting communication studies in diplomatic field is quite rare problematic).

The research question the author addresses is formulated as follows: “Whether the 2016 US election hacking scandal can be seen as a key event in the mass media framing towards Russia by leading American newspapers”. Such question is mainly answered in the text but it need to be clarified how such RQ was born and on which assumptions is based on. In some extend such RQ seems to be axiomatic because it seems to be more or less evident that any event related to the topic and covered more than others will automatically be the key one.

One of the problems of this paper is the manifested causality between the spreading out of the information about the Russian role in US elections and the Cold war stereotypes about Russian which were circulating through US media. The author writes: “If an increasing amount of stereotypes towards Russia appear after the scandal, especially those connected to the Cold War, it is fair to assume that the fears connected to Russia resurfaced and that the hacking scandal was indeed a key event”. Such standing demonstrates quite simplistic approach to the nature of stereotype, to its circulation and seems to be based on earlier models of stereotypes coming from the American empirical functionalist school and especially on Lippman’s work. But since 1930-40 the media theory evolved a lot towards more subtle mechanisms of stereotypes creation. Moreover the topic of the paper is about media that’s why it could be useful to clearly separate stereotypes existing generally in public opinion from stereotypes as it was presented by general media.

The general structure of the Master thesis is logic. First chapter elaborates the theory (mainly theory of stereotype) for the analysis. Second one presents the results of the empirical research made on content analysis methodology.

Such structure at the same time is not without mistakes. The section 2.1 of the first chapter making a historical overview of the US-Russia relationship seems to be not fitting well to the key problematic of the paper. The paper concerns the stereotype and coverage of the Russia by the US media. It’s based on theoretical framework of media studies. From this perspective it’s quite difficult to understand for what purpose the author would like to “analyze the result of content analysis in geopolitical terms” (as it’s

declared in this section). Such analysis doesn't fit paradigm of media studies and transform the paper from media studies perspective into International relations problematic.

Such problem is evidence of the larger problem – non-formulation of the study's design. From one hand the empirical research on quite huge sample was made and its empirical results seem to be relevant and very interesting for the further research. From another hand there are a lot of methodological elements missing in this paper which makes difficult to understand the general logics of the author. There is no formulation of the scientific novelty, no formulation of the approach (which in Russia is often replace by the formulation of the object and subject of the research) provided. RQ is not formulated in terms of key objective and tasks which need to be accomplished. As a result, we can observe such non-relevant tasks as “make historical overview of the Russia-US relations” etc. We can find such section in any thesis devoted to the international journalism, soft power, media war etc.

In the current structure of the master thesis theoretical approach is not summarized in the first chapter after which the used theoretical concept should be transformed into the set of variables and method of empirical part. Some theoretical parts on content analysis figurate in the second chapter (marked as empirical). Similarly some theoretical points on using the frame analysis are provided in the second chapter. Such approach disintegrates the theoretical framework, makes it more eclectic and it becomes more and more difficult to understand how the theory from the first chapter was used in the empirical part (chapter 2).

As a key approach to the frame analysis the author uses the Matthes and Kohring one which makes difficult to understand the necessity to do a so detailed review of different theories and approaches to stereotypes.

General grading

Assessment criteria
<p>Research design <i>The student is capable of independently formulating a relevant research problem for a relatively complex research including research questions and a corresponding strategy but have some difficulties in making the whole research design of the paper: define research tasks, link them with methods etc. .</i></p>
<p>Knowledge of relevant literature and Grasp of theory <i>The student shows familiarity with, and understanding of, the relevant literature. He/she has incorporated recent developments in the field relevant to his/her research/design. He/she shows an ability to conduct a critical study and in-depth analysis of the relevant sections of the selected sources and, on the basis of broadening, integration and/or comparison of the various theories, concepts and models. Has some difficulties in developing his/her own ideas for the conceptualization and operationalization of the research question.</i></p>
<p>Structure of chapters and sections & Coherence and quality of argument <i>Structure of chapters and paragraphs is clear and subsequent. The quality of English and general presentation are of a standard for publication. His/her argument is structured, logical, to the point and linguistically correct, and the literature references have been incorporated according to a scientific standard used in the field in question. Arguments are substantial and coherent.</i></p>
<p>Originality <i>Novelty of research results is achieved (e.g. new interpretation of scientific theories, concepts, constructions, models, etc. is suggested; theory supplemented with new data independently collected, processed and analyzed by the student etc.</i></p>
<p>Discussion and development of empirical material <i>The student is capable of independently handling the instruments for data collection and analysis in a valid and reliable manner, resulting in a data set and corresponding analysis results, the validity of which he/she has ascertained and which enable him/her to answer the research questions.</i></p>

Resulting grade (based on your assessment of the students' work and on the grades for each criteria which you chose)

8 (on 10)

Signature

