

OPINION

for the awarding of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Semiotics) to the candidate Prof. Dr. Kristian Krastinov Bankov

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The evaluation is based on the following materials:

1. Dissertation thesis “The Digital Mind: Semiotic Studies of Digital Culture”, 204 pages with bibliography and index, in English. The same work was published as a book in January 2022 by Springer.
2. Resume (Avtoreferat) in Bulgarian, 17 pages and a bibliography of 18 pages.
3. Curriculum vitae of the candidate and a list of publications referencing the fulfillment of the minimum national requirements.

The present opinion is based on detailed consideration of the provided materials, as well as the candidate's other publications, which I evaluate in accordance with the current Law for the development of academic faculty of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation (in force since June 29, 2018, adopted with PMS No. 122) and the Ordinance for the Development of the academic faculty at the NBU.

1. Significance of the researched problem in the scientific field.

Essentially, the presented dissertation is a collection of independent research essays. They can be read as a whole in the light of a general theoretical framework laid down in the first chapter of the work¹. Thus, the central problem of the research can be defined as the search for the semiotic model of digital culture. The concept of the platosphere was introduced as a response to this quest: „I use the term platosphere to refer to any internet user-generated content (UGC) platform viewed from a semiotic perspective as a Semiosphere.“ (p. 28) Chapter Two presents the key transition from textuality to interactivity as the logic of the platospheres and states that „the cultural logic of the digital age is economic and not linguistic as it was before“ (p. 41).

The search for a theoretical model for making sense of the digital age is undoubtedly a central issue in the contemporary humanities and social sciences. There is no doubt that it is a study with a high degree of relevance and scientific significance.

¹ The numbering of the chapters in the resume/avtoreferat does not correspond to the numbering of the chapters in the dissertation, but it matches that of the published book. Also, the file with the dissertation lacks page numbering, which makes citation difficult. In this Opinion, I will use the numbering of the chapters from the resume, as well as the translation of the titles into Bulgarian, and when citing a page from the Dissertation I will follow the automatic numbering of the Adobe Acrobat Reader software.

The next ten chapters are case studies in which this overarching theoretical framework is played out. The variety of researched objects – from money and legal tender, through football, to love and sex or various manifestations of popular culture in a digital environment; from the issues of individual (digital) identity and nationalisms, to the challenges the educational system is facing – this diversity is the reason why the collection unfolds as a heterogeneous sequence of texts. In fact, the heterogeneous nature of the work is recognized by the author himself in the introduction (p. 16).

The accumulation of case studies of a disparate nature is somewhat compensated for in Chapter 12, which returns to theory and thereby allows the multitude of scattered case studies to be grasped at a glance. It argues that we are witnessing a “revolution in communication” that is capable of overturning our entire culture: „the collectively-articulated content, i.e. that which we call ‘culture’ and which forms the fabric of the social life of any community, has ceased to perform its basic function in the same way as in the era of verbal intertextuality“ (p. 179). In the age of hypertextuality, of constant interactivity and the impossibility of fixing the text (and killing the author), the principle of the so-called “euphoric textualism” loses its meaning. The very paradigm of text and intertextuality seems to be displaced by something else, and the main patterns of dissemination of cultural content are no longer based on the model of the text. Hence the conclusion that „the new media are ‘working hard’ to desemiotize culture“, or to seek for new ways to „spontaneously share experiences without the mediation of a conventional sign system“ (p.181). I dare say that the thesis of the ‘liberation’ from the paradigm of textuality does not sound pessimistic. The eroticism of hypertext, or the pleasure/arousal from the emergence of a myriad new forms of sharing cultural content, can be integrated in the sphere of higher education, while semiotics – as the author affirms – has the potential to inform scientific studies of these new spontaneous forms of communication and the education of hypertext (p.186, although here my optimism diverts from the author’s position).

2. Justification of the aims and objectives of the dissertation

Can we accept that if the aim of the study is to propose an overarching framework for understanding the ‘semiotics of digital culture’ (as stated in the contributions), then it is justified to analyze such heterogeneous cultural phenomena like money, nationalism and sex, in view of this aim? My answer is that such a decision on the structure of the work – in view of the aims and objectives of the dissertation – is justified and adequate. My personal feeling is that the reader loses ground and sense of coherence in the exposition, that in the end he does not know what are her/his takeaways after reading this book, and settles for the principle “there is a little something for everyone here”.

3. Correspondence between the chosen methodology and research methods and the set aims and objectives of the dissertation

On page 24 of the first chapter it is said that “the closest established method of study is a grounded theory”. In the following lines it is specified that theoretical reflection is essentially

deductive and the main task of the work is the validation of a previously established theoretical model, while “reference to the new digital reality is supported by statistics and documented facts”. The latter contradicts the principles of grounded theory. Umberto Eco and Jeremy Rifkin are also noted as methodological inspirations.

In my opinion, the research does not use a uniform methodology, and a different approach is chosen in each chapter. For example, chapter 11 uses a semiological analysis following Barth's classical model. Chapters 1, 3 and 12 are essentially theoretical; they do not deal with empirical material (other than by way of illustration) and have no data analysis methodology of their own. The fact that the collection of essays does not apply a uniform methodology is not necessarily a disadvantage. On the contrary, the appropriate approach is chosen for each individual case.

4. Scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation work (description and evaluation), including the presence of an original contribution in science.

I wish to highlight two major theoretical contributions of the work:

- The concept of the platfosphere, which adapts Lotman's semiosphere to the analysis of universes of user-generated content. It can also be played out in subsequent more extensive case studies on specific internet platforms. The leading economic logic of platforms can be clearly seen in platforms such as Spotify, which are not mentioned in the text.
- The critique of textualism and the transition to interactivity as a model for spreading cultural content has a revolutionary potential (in the sense of a scientific revolution, i.e. a paradigm shift). It is a very powerful intellectual tool and I hope it finds many followers who will test it in their empirical research.

5. Evaluation of the publications based on the dissertation: number, nature of the editions in which they were published.

Eight out of a total of thirteen chapters in the book have been previously published in scientific journals or collective volumes, under the same or a different title. I take this to be an established and current practice in science, which allows researchers to test their hypotheses and further develop their research in response to feedback. The following parts have been published before:

- Ch. 1 The digital semiosphere, p. 22-39, reproduces with minor stylistic changes the article „Platfospheres and sociocultural explosion of Web 2.0. The commercial centre of the digital semiosphere“, *Sign Systems Studies* 48(2/4), 2020, 246–270;
- Ch.3 Copyright in the digital experience economy. p. 49-60, was published under the title „The copyright of my sensorimotor experience“ as chapter 12 in: Marusek, S. (Ed.). (2016). *Synesthetic Legalities: Sensory Dimensions of Law and Jurisprudence* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315611693>;

- Ch.6 Cultural transformations of love and sex in the digital age, takes on the essential part of the introduction to the edited volume *Digital Age in Semiotics & Communication*, Vol. II, 2019, Pp. 7–17 <https://doi.org/10.33919/dasc.19.2.1>;
- Ch.8 Semiotic overview on legal tender and digital money, (p.105-119), was published as „From gold to futurity: a semiotic overview on trust, legal tender and fiat money, *Social Semiotics*, 2019, 29:3, 336-350, DOI: [10.1080/10350330.2019.1587833](https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2019.1587833)
- Ch. 9 Identity in digital age: From nationalisms to the post-truth uses of collective symbols, was published as „Flags, Identity, Memory: From Nationalisms to the Post-truth Uses of Collective Symbols. In: Wagner, A., Marusek, S. (eds) 2021. *Flags, Color, and the Legal Narrative. Law and Visual Jurisprudence*, vol 1. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32865-8_9
- Ch.11 A semiotic exploration in the web2.0 emoti(c)onal discusivity in public debates (p.152-172), was published as „Cyberbullying and hate speech in the debate around the ratification of the Istanbul convention in Bulgaria: a semiotic analysis of the communication dynamics“, *Social Semiotics*, 30:3, 344-364, DOI: [10.1080/10350330.2020.1731175](https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1731175)
- Ch.12 From textualism to hypertextualism, repeats the earlier text „The Pleasure of the Hypertext“, *Digital Age in Semiotics & Communication*, Vol. II, 2019, Pp. 139-159, <https://doi.org/10.33919/dasc.19.2.9>
- Ch 13 Identity and consumer rituals in Facebook, was published as „CONSUMER RITUALS IN FACEBOOK“ in the *Proceedings of the 12th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS)*, IASS Publications & NBU Publishing House, 2017.

None of the above-mentioned publications was presented during the defense of a previous dissertation or a competition for an academic position. The requirements of the Law art. 12, para. 5 are observed. However, it is worth noting that in the presented dissertation the main ideas from the already published texts were not further developed or enriched with additional empirical material, and their conclusions were not aligned to a main argument line of the research. Thus, the total volume of the dissertation is only 204 pages.

6. Citations by other authors, reviews in the scientific press, etc.

The publications listed above are in English, with high-rank academic publishers and wide visibility in the specialized scientific field. Some of them have already accumulated a certain number of citations (19 citations of the above-mentioned titles collected in Google scholar as of October 12, 2022). The book based on the dissertation has also already been cited. The articles described above as Ch. 8 and Ch. 11 are listed in the scientific metric databases Scopus and Web of Science. The citations and listings testify to the indisputably high scientific quality of the published results.

In addition to this list, the candidate presents a few more publications that are not directly related to the topic of the dissertation, but fit into his general idea of the platfosphere as a basic theoretical model in the semiotics of digital culture.

Prof. Bankov is a renowned specialist with high reputation in the scientific community. It is not difficult to find reviews of his work in the scientific press also outside the scientific metric databases. He is a leading figure in the global field of semiotics.

7. Opinions, recommendations, notes.

I have no further recommendations and notes.

8. Conclusion with a clearly formulated positive or negative assessment of the dissertation.

Based on the above, I give **a positive assessment** and recommend to the scientific **jury to award the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences”** in 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences (Semiotics) to Prof. Kristian Krastanov Bankov.

13.10.2022

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Signature

(assoc. prof. Valentina Gueorguieva, PhD)