

Review of Yuliya Yurchuk's BA thesis "The Role of the International and Czech Independent Music Media and Journalism in the Context of the Latest Economical and Technological Changes"

Yuliya Yurchuk's BA thesis addresses an important topic of how the recent economic and technological changes in the music industry affected independent music journalism, both globally and in the Czech Republic. The student provides a relevant theoretical and historical discussion, and attempts to apply it ethnographically to the situation in the Czech Republic. However, there are several major problems with the work, mainly related to the goals of the study that are not fully achieved in the written work, as well as to some other issues (theory, methodology, structure, interpretations, language).

Student's theoretical part in the first two chapters of the thesis that deal with music industry (Chapter One), and with music journalism (Chapter Two), relate both of these phenomena to the economic and technological changes of the last 30 years. Several aspects of these changes are discussed relatively successfully, but there are also some problems with clarity and precision, especially in relation to the concept of "creative industries" which would need to be more successfully explained in relation to the recent economic changes (neoliberalism, urban regeneration, creative cities, creative classes), and more clearly distinguished from the concept of culture industries. Moreover, the student only discussed the British case studies (through the application of David Hesmondhalgh's theories), but ignores other important literature in that regard (for example, the work by Robert Lloyd). Particularly the concept of creative classes and related issues (new employment arrangements, i.e., flexible and precarious work) would be important to discuss in this regard, as these are also some of the issues that come up in student's ethnographic work (non-regular, freelance, voluntary journalist jobs in the Czech Republic).

Furthermore, in Chapter Two, the theories about music journalism and independent music journalism are somehow randomly selected and discussed, without much attention given to the linking of these theories to the main goals of the thesis, i.e., by focusing on the responses in recent music journalism to the economic and technological changes of the last 30 years (for example, as related to new economic and job arrangements, new media, new music industry practices). The student here and there briefly mentions some general changes in this regard (e.g., loss of readership and a turn to business models in the music press due to digitalization in the 2000s), but has little to say about some concrete journalistic responses to the recent economic and technological changes (the student briefly mentions standardization tendencies in the music journalism of the 1990s, and the emergence of blogs in the 2000s, but these are only very brief and passing notes; she also mentions the changes in the so-called "new journalism" of the 1970s and 1980s, but these older phenomena should not be confused with more recent changes). This problem is also related to the issue of achieving the goals of the thesis, because the student would need to establish a proper theoretical framework comprising a list of concrete journalistic responses to the recent economic and technological changes in the theoretical part (Chapter Two), which she could then use as a model for application in the ethnographic chapter (Chapter Three). However, there is very little such linking between Chapters Two and Three, and between theory and ethnography in Yurchuk's thesis (I will elaborate more on this in continuation). The problem with theory in Chapter Two is also partly due to a negligent reading of some of the core articles that discuss the changes in music journalism in the 1990s (Atton) and 2000s (Forde, Baym and Burnett, Hellman and

Jaakkola), as some of the central issues from these articles are not sufficiently addressed in the student's work, for example, issues of polyglottism vs monoglottism in recent music journalism (Atton, Forde), the problem of freelancing (Forde), the fans' unpaid labor and the role of blogs and social media in this regard (Baym and Burnett), or the recent shifts from aesthetic to journalistic paradigm in music journalism (Hellman and Jaakkola). Yurchuk actually mentions some of these issues in her thesis (for example, the difference between aesthetic and journalistic paradigm, on page 24), but in a very ahistorical way (as general tendencies, unrelated to specific economic and technological shifts). This is also the problem of writing style, which often does not attempt to clearly link each separate issue to the main goals of the article (i.e., to the recent economic and technological changes).

The student then in Chapter Three discusses her ethnographic data as related to the music journalism in the Czech Republic, specifically in relation to three local media (Full Moon, Radio Wave, and Respekt). She provides some interesting ethnographic data in this regard, and discusses some local journalistic responses to recent economic and technological changes (e.g., discussion of digitalization in this chapter is quite satisfactory, although not structured very well), but there are several other serious problems with this chapter. First, only three interviews are used for the ethnographic discussion (Pařízek, Hroch, Turek), which is very little. Second, more systematic analysis of the local media would be needed, which would also employ some firm theoretical model of comparison between the three media, as related to new journalistic practices (a model that would need to be first theoretically developed in Chapter Two). For example, new employment arrangements mentioned in relation to the theoretical part (flexibilization, unpaid labor, freelancing) should be examined in relation to all three media. Yurchuk instead provides some sufficient data in this regard for Full Moon (31–32), but less so for the other two, and she also does not frame this discussion through any theoretical framework of recent economic changes as related to new employment arrangements. Also the digitalization tendencies (e.g., shifts to online publishing) of all three media are not discussed systematically (this issue is acknowledged for Full Moon, but not for the other two media). In general, it should be noted here that random selection and discussion of data is not the same as rigorous systematic analysis. Third, there is a problem of interpretations. For example, the student discusses specific writing strategies of local music journalists, such as writing about “context” and “meaning” of particular music albums as a “new role” of local media, and as a supposed response in this regard to recent economic and technological changes (42). However, writing about the context and meaning of particular music albums is not something new, but was already established by the so-called “New journalism” in the 1970s and 1980s. It would be possible to argue that this kind of writing resists standardization tendencies in the today's mainstream music journalism, but this could be done only in reference to some proper theoretical contextualization (missing in Chapter Two), and with more rigorous analysis of these issues (for example, by referencing the issue of polyglottism vs monoglottism, or aesthetic vs journalistic paradigm, and by analysing the specific characteristics of each of these approaches, step by step). This is again also the problem of student's writing style: lack of rigorous analysis, and lack of linking of separate issues to the main goals of the article, which is rarely employed in this chapter (partly also because of lack of firm theoretical model that the student could refer to in this way). Further, student also often relies too heavily on interview statements (for example, about supposed freedom and autonomy that the journalists have in all three media), but these kinds of claims should be further triangulated (by comparing what people say, to what they actually do, i.e.,

by comparing interview statements with data from content and structural analysis of all three media, which would probably reveal different levels of freedom and autonomy between all three media).

There are also some other general problems that I need to briefly mention, as related to the whole thesis. The structure is often confusing, as the student jumps back and forth between separate topics (for example, digitalization is discussed in two different sections, in Chapter Three). Furthermore, the writing style is often grammatically inadequate and vague (for example, vague claims about media impact on content on page 36, or about “change in categorization” on page 39). In addition, the methodology part in introduction is insufficiently discussed. Finally, the student often leaves out references to scholarly works, or to specific pages of these works.

To summarize, although Yurchuk’s BA thesis demonstrates many problems and inadequacies in terms of theory, writing, interpretation, and methodology, it could be argued that the student nevertheless achieves some minimal standards that are expected from BA theses, more in terms of theory and less in terms of her ethnographic work. Therefore, I recommend grade 3 for the achievement.

David Verbuč