

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

MA THESIS REVIEW

NOTE: Only the grey fields should be filled out!

Review type (choose one):

Review by thesis supervisor Review by opponent

Thesis author:

Surname and given name: Nathalie Weatherald

Thesis title: Reinventing the blurry oval: Practitioner perceptions of deepfakes as a tool for anonymisation in documentary film and video journalism

Reviewer:

Surname and given name: Sandra Lábová

Affiliation: IKSŽ

1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH PROPOSAL AND THESIS (mark one box for each row)

		Conforms to approved research proposal	Changes are well explained and appropriate	Changes are explained but are inappropriate	Changes are not explained and are inappropriate	Does not conform to approved research proposal
1.1	Research objective(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.2	Methodology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.3	Thesis structure	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

COMMENTARY (description of the relationship between the research proposal and the thesis. If there are problems, please be specific):

The thesis presents novel issues and provides original research results regarding the use of deepfakes in a documentary film production. The candidate uses a qualitative approach to examine the documentary filmmakers' and video journalists' (practitioners') perceptions of the benefits and limitations of using deepfakes – a technology that commonly evokes adverse reactions due to its exploitable potential. Changes were made compared to the research proposal. The candidate decided to omit the audiences from the analysis. The reasons for this change are explained and justified. I understand the author's concerns. On the other hand, I believe the research of the audiences would provide a broader perspective and expand the knowledge of the research problem.

2. EVALUATION OF THE THESIS CONTENT

Use letters A – B – C – D – E – F (A=best, F= failed)

		Grade
2.1	Quality and appropriateness of the theoretical framework	A
2.2	Ability to critically evaluate and apply the literature	A
2.3	Quality and soundness of the empirical research	A
2.4	Ability to select the appropriate methods and to use them correctly	A
2.5	Quality of the conclusion	A
2.6	Thesis originality and its contribution to academic knowledge production	B

COMMENTARY (description of thesis content and the main problems):

The chapter Introduction outlines the research objectives and summarizes film documentary Welcome to Chechnya (France, 2020) – its production, reception and the use of deepfakes in providing anonymity to vulnerable sources. The candidate introduces deepfakes, describes the structure of the thesis, and presents the study's aims. Her writing is clear and to the point.

Following the chapter – Literature review – provides a theoretical framework for the research. The chapter is well structured and in line with the discussed main interest. The candidate addresses issues such as the

technical image's relationship to reality and truth, the digital revolution and the advent of computational photography and synthetic AI images. Additionally, the chapter discusses documentary filmmaking in the context of a fluid perception of reality and factuality. The candidate connects these issues to contemporary 'post-truth' environments, augmented storytelling processes, and journalistic practice while questioning its ethical frameworks. The candidate demonstrates an understanding of primary literature and provides several interesting examples to connect the theoretical concept to actual practice.

The chapter Methodology addresses research design and specifies research by stating the research question. Last but not least, it describes the choice of respondents (purposive sampling) and methods used for data collection (semi-structured interviews) and data analysis (thematic analysis). The candidate addresses the advantages and disadvantages of each of these methods. With its scope, the chapter Methodology provides a solid ground for the research and demonstrates the candidate's knowledge of the data collection process through semi-structured interviews and subsequent analysis.

The chapter Findings and Discussion sums up the results of the analysis and interprets them in relation to the theoretical framework while providing links to relevant academic literature. It also states the limitations of the study.

The results presented are convincing and clear. For clarity, the findings are demonstrated visual via the primary and secondary thematic map. This helps with the interpretation of rich qualitative data.

The notable findings are the following:

- The respondents struggle to find benefits in using deepfakes apart from the unique occasions.
- The limitations prevailed over benefits. Namely in the context of practical considerations, aesthetic concerns, trustworthiness.
- Deepfakes – regardless of the intention with which they are utilised – were still viewed strongly by some practitioners as disruptors of the core principles of journalistic work.

3. EVALUATION OF THE THESIS FORM

Use letters A – B – C – D – E – F (A=best, F= failed)

		Grade
3.1	Quality of the structure	A
3.2	Quality of the argumentation	A
3.3	Appropriate use of academic terminology	A
3.4	Quality, quantity and appropriateness of the citations (both in the theory part and in the empirical part)	A
3.5	Conformity to quotation standards (*)	A
3.6	Use of an academic writing style, and correct use of language (both grammar and spelling)	A
3.6	Quality of the textual lay-outing and appendices	B

(*) in case the text contains quotations without references, the grade is F; in case the text contains plagiarised parts, do not recommend the thesis for defence and suggest disciplinary action against the author instead.

COMMENTARY (description of thesis form and the main problems):

The structure of the thesis is well-developed and logical. The candidate uses academic terminology, and the text is consistent. The dissertation is technically correct. Quotations are treated correctly. However, diagrams and tables would benefit from better descriptions..

4. OVERALL EVALUATION (provide a summarizing list of the thesis's strengths and weaknesses):

The presented master thesis brings a well-developed study. The research is based on a sound theoretical foundation, critically accountable. The thesis shows a systematic structure. The candidate demonstrates knowledge of the research problem and the ability to work independently and critically.

Concerning the originality of the study, the topic and the main research objectives are certainly novel, both within the context of deepfakes research and journalism studies. The thesis presents the issue from an unusual perspective and sort of de-demonize the use of deepfakes technology. I believe it contributes to the discussion by offering an alternative narrative. On the other hand, a narrow definition of the research problem limits the possibility of being recognized as a significant contribution to the academic knowledge discussion. However, this might change in the future. The deepfakes technology and its potential impact on broader societal realities are still under investigation.

5. QUESTIONS OR TOPICS TO BE DISCUSSED DURING THE THESIS DEFENSE:

5.1	In your opinion, is the use of deepfakes in "serious" documentary work justifiable?
5.2	What, according to you, are the biggest threats the deepfakes impose on journalism? Would you also identify other benefits as the one research in your thesis?
5.3	
5.4	

6. ANTIPLAGIARISM CHECK

The reviewer is familiar with the thesis' antiplagiarism system score.

If the score is above 5%, please evaluate and indicate problems:

6.1	The overall similarity is 17%, most of which are included in theoretical part of the thesis. All sources and citations are correctly cited.
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7. SUGGESTED GRADE OF THE THESIS AS A WHOLE (choose one or two)

- A excellent
- B very good (above average but with some weaknesses)
- C good (average with some important weaknesses)
- D satisfactory (below average with significant weaknesses)
- E marginal pass (meeting minimal requirements)
- F not recommended for defence

If the mark is an "F", please provide your reasons for not recommending the thesis for defence:

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Date: August 19, 2022

Signature:

A finalised review should be printed, signed and submitted in two copies to the secretary of the Department of Media Studies. The electronic version of the review should be converted into a PDF and uploaded to SIS, or sent to the Department of Media Studies secretary who will upload it to SIS on the reviewer's behalf.

Do not upload PDFs with a scanned signature, the review uploaded to SIS must be without signature.