

## **Scientific Opinion**

**Of**

**Assoc. professor Manuela Manliherova**

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", professional field 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences on scientific works for participation in a competition for the academic position of associate professor, in professional field 3.5 Social Communications and Information Sciences, Digital Communications, FBO Faculty, Media and Communications Department, announced in State Newspaper G no. 69/16.08.2024

Higher Education Area 3. Social, business and legal sciences

### **I. Assessment of compliance with the minimum national requirements and the requirements of the New Bulgarian University**

It can be seen that the candidate asst. **Dr. Justine Toms Jadala Maria** fulfills the conditions and requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as meets the additional requirements the academic position of "Associate Professor" in professional field 3.5 Social Communications and Information Sciences. Dr. Justine Toms has submitted documents certifying that she has obtained the educational and scientific degree of "PhD". She presented a monograph entitled "Podcasts - The Voice of the Internet", published in 2022. It is clear from the applicant's self-assessment report and the supporting evidence that she has held the position of assistant at the NBU for more than two years and meets the minimum national requirements. There is no proven plagiarism in the candidate's scientific works according to the law. The candidacy of asst. Dr. Justine Toms meets the minimum national requirements and requirements of the New Bulgarian University, and on a number of indicators more than the required points have been collected.

### **II. Research (creative) activity and results**

#### **1. Evaluation of the monographic work, creative performances or other publications corresponding in volume and completeness to a monographic work, including an evaluation of the scientific and scientific-applied contributions of the author.**

The work of Asst. Justine Toms in the field of online communication, science communication, digital marketing, and media literacy undoubtedly provides the necessary practical basis to her teaching activity and to the scientific-applied nature of the current research dedicated to podcasts. I would add, the colleague is a competent researcher and teacher, skillfully combining the practical experience of a leading expert in the field of digital media and communications, distinguished by dedication and creativity. And as someone with extensive experience in media and communications, Dr. Toms provides an in-depth and multi-dimensional view of audio formats at a time when video content is capturing almost 100 percent of the online audience. Here the focus is on audio and listening, listening as the first and inalienable part of good communication, but with a markedly critical eye on content creators influenced by social networks, for whom creating a product is simply a commentary on their own version of what happened. In this regard, the author of the study clearly poses the question of responsibility and standards when creating podcasts, stressing that it is one thing to be a source of information - to tell your point of view or to a group of like-minded people,

it is quite another to be a creator of media information - in-depth, multi-layered and above all verified. As author herself says, today we can keep a little and a lot of attention from the digital person, but it depends on the approach and above all what the content is. As a researcher of the Bulgarian internet space, Justine Toms correctly notes the oversaturation with podcasts, which, as we know, can lead to the homogenization of the audience. It is through the examples that she gives this critical look at the content side of podcasts by appealing for quality content. An important point of contribution for me is the identification of Bulgarian podcasts against the background of world practice. The Bulgarian audio format of the podcasts is around and over 30 minutes, and it makes an impression that the most popular among the Bulgarian audience podcasts reach 3-4 hours. An achievement of this research by Dr. Toms is precisely the audio content-youth audience relationship that builds on postponed listening, an opportunity for podcasts compared to real-time audio streaming, thus young people perceive audio content as a natural thing because they have multifunctional media behavior as consumers.

I totally agree with J. Toms that podcasts are upgrading radio listening or simply put audio content is being created and consumed digitally. I would also like to point out that in the digital environment audio has begun to experience its Renaissance, which is very faithfully captured by Justin Toms. The author emphasized the characteristics of podcasts - the content, the distribution of that content across platforms, the consumption through different devices, and this creates the intimacy inherent in radio, while at the same time unfolding the **theater of the mind**, which is the most important distinguishing feature of audio content. I would like to emphasize that for me the business-oriented part of the book is the most essential, answering the question why podcasts can be part of the marketing mix, which is always looking for new and innovative forms. Podcasts can be part of the so-called content marketing, a key element for businesses in a digital environment, as noted by Dr. Toms, but even more significant is their presence in the ecosystem - site-blog-podcast, explaining and investment side. Therefore, I think that the blog - podcast comparison /similarities and differences/ is essential for those who would start such an activity.

Let's not forget that the blog can also be in an audio version, combining text with speech. The author's contribution is that she guides the reader consistently revealing the advantages, helping him orientate quickly and easily. In addition to offering, it many possibilities – podcast content is also presented as a vlog in video format, video content can also be accompanied by an audio-only version of a given video episode. The whole analysis of the author provides the reader with the ability to form and critical sense to recognize radio content, video content, or custom-made audio content such as a podcast. The selection of content is important, as repeatedly emphasized in the book, which makes it repeatedly worthwhile as a scholarly study. The monograph has a practical contribution, brings out typical case studies and examines situations, summarizes practices and approaches. The book is the result of a combination of professional reflection and in-depth research into this phenomenon and would be useful not only to the academic community but also to a wider range of readers as a practical guide.

**2. Evaluation of the contributions in the other attached publications (creative performances) made after the appointment of the academic position "chief assistant" or the academic position "associate professor" (for professor candidates). It also includes an assessment of the peer review requirement of the publications.**

The 16 research papers submitted by the candidate in the competition demonstrate expertise in online communication by discussing issues related to content, media literacy, improving

critical thinking skills, communicating science through internet tools – blogs and podcasts. In addition, Justine Toms presents publications in which she addresses issues related to gender equality. As can be seen from the applicant's attached evidence, Dr. Justine Toms' publications have been cited in a large number of peer-reviewed monographs and collective volumes (36), as well as peer-reviewed non-refereed publications (5).

### **3. Evaluation of the results of participation in research and creative projects and application of the obtained results in practice.**

According to the indicator of participation in international scientific and educational projects, the attached reference confirms that Justine Toms participated as an expert in the work on the Information Matters project, financed under the Erasmus program of the European Commission and implemented by the "Global Libraries - Bulgaria" foundation in partnership with organizations from Austria, Belgium and Romania. In the period 01/01/2023 - 03/30/2024 Dr. Toms participated in the development of lectures and educational materials for the training of trainers and trainees and in meetings with a group of students from partner countries on media literacy. At the moment, Dr. Toms is training media literacy trainers from Bulgaria. In creative research until 2025, Justine Toms aims to explore communication through content in social networks and online space. The study was accompanied by the conduct of an in-depth study of scientific literature on the subject and a practical study with a survey method and in-depth interviews. The candidate has the ambitious task of making a comparative analysis between Bulgaria and Europe on the topic of humor in the digital age.

## **III. Learning and teaching activity**

### **1. Auditory and non-auditory employment, work in the electronic training module "MOODLE - NBU", provision of student practices and internships, work with students and doctoral students.**

The candidate is the creator of a number of author programs with a provided information resource in the Moodle e-trainer module in the disciplines: Social Media and Network Community Management, Digital Marketing, Online Reputation Management, Web Content Creation, Web Design, Blog and Bloggers, Online Space and Public relations. The attached report provides clear evidence of regular academic activities. She actively works in the creative debate: Debates for student journalists of NBU, 2015, and conducts two scientific supervisions of bachelor's theses and two of master's theses. She is a reviewer of a number of graduate theses. Dr. Toms participates in creating and conducting student internships in the media for undergraduate students. It helps to ensure the professional realization of the students after completing their education. Justine Toms is trained in the training seminars for teachers organized by the NBU. She is a member of the team for organizing and conducting spring and autumn conferences of the Department of Media and Communications 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023.

## **IV. Administrative and public activity**

### **1. Participation in collective management bodies of the NBU**

Dr. Justin Toms participated in the Program Board of the Department of Mass Communications of the NBU in the years in which she was a part-time lecturer in the role of an expert from practice.

## 2. Public activity

The public and administrative activity of the candidate is multi-role, from creator and head of the website of the year contest in 1999, a series of author's books with a practical focus, an author's podcast about digital presence in Bulgaria, the first children's book in our country, dedicated to the safe surfing of children in internet. The professional recognition of Dr. Justine Toms is expressed in a number of memberships in national and international professional organizations such as SBJ, Association of European Journalists, Bulgarian Association of CSR Specialists, and Public Council of the National Council for Safe Internet, IAB Bulgaria.

## 3. Attracting students to the program.

The teaching work of Dr. Justine Toms is active. Along with regular courses in the bachelor's and master's programs, she also teaches in the EUMEPLAT 2021-2022 European project.

## V. Personal impressions of the candidate (if any)

From my direct impressions of Assistant Professor Toms, I can say that she took an active part in the joining of the Media and Communications Department of NBU to the large European academic network of the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA).

## VI. Opinions, recommendations and notes on the activity and achievements of the candidate

I have long known Justine Toms' work in online media and online marketing, at Radio France International. I know her ability of building contacts, her affinity for developing innovative and sustainable practices, and I am pleased to note the undeniable scientific contributions that each of her research brings. I believe that her confectionery is an excellent example of the integration of theory and practice.

## Conclusion

Based on the above, I believe that Dr. Justine Toms fully meets the requirements for holding the academic position of "associate professor" at NBU. I express my highly positive assessment of her teaching, educational, administrative and public activities, as well as her scientific contributions to the presented monographic work and the other attached publications with which she applied in the current competition. In conclusion, I suggest that the Scientific Jury make a positive decision and that the Academic Council of the NBU choose Asst. Dr. **Justine Toms Jadala Maria** in the academic position of "associate professor" of the New Bulgarian University in professional direction 3.5. Social Communications and Information Sciences.

Date 28/11/2024.

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