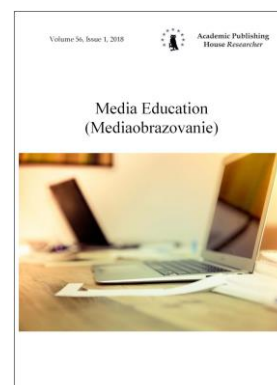


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## Hermeneutic analysis of internet sites of english-speaking countries about school and university

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### Abstract

The article presents the results of the hermeneutic analysis of present-day British and American Internet sites about school and university. The research objective was to analyze and characterize the cultural and historical contexts, to define the role and value of the school and university topic in the mirror of Internet sites of the English-speaking countries in terms of social studies, culture studies, anthropology and media education. The author of the article concludes that the analyzed British and American Internet media texts about school and university: 1) tell about a crisis and a controversial policy of reforming the national education system in the English-speaking countries; 2) are the expression of the media texts authors' civic views, seeking to raise public awareness of problem zones of the contemporary national education system; 3) present a wide range of urgent topics and plots about school and university education, closely related to the themes and plots of English-language television programmes, documentary and feature films; 4) use a variety of genre modifications to represent reality (official sites of the state, sites of educational institutions, informational and thematic sites, forums, blogs, personal teachers' and principals' sites, sites of educators, journals and newspapers, etc.); 5) realistically reflect both positive (equal educational opportunities for every citizen, struggle against racism and intolerance, tolerance promotion, creating a safe school environment, education reforms, inclusive education, international cooperation in education, use of new information technologies in the learning process, monitoring and improving the quality of educational services, etc.) and negative (budget cuts in education, bullying and cyberbullying, school shootings, teacher strikes, lack of teachers and professional burnout of teachers) aspects of social, political, cultural and educational life spheres in the English-speaking countries; 6) emphasize the dominant idea of national identity and community cohesion and integration, cultivating national values across the curriculum as a core strategy for the modern system of education in the English-speaking countries.

**Keywords:** hermetic analysis, media text, Internet site, media education, school, university, students, teachers, Great Britain, USA.

### 1. Introduction

This research is devoted to the study of Internet sites of English-speaking countries, mainly of the United States and Great Britain, on the topic of school and university. The focus of this research is the sites created by school and university teachers, educators and education experts, where they keep diaries, share experiences in their pedagogical activity, discuss current problems

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of modern education, exchange educational materials and useful links to articles and publications on education.

Typology of English-language Internet sites for teachers is very diverse, as well as the functions of these websites: information retrieval and archival websites for teachers and school children, news sites, analytical and statistical Internet resources about schools and universities.

School and university teachers, heads of educational institutions of English-speaking countries actively join professional virtual communities, maintain their own blogs, and create professional personal pages on websites for teachers, parents and schoolchildren.

The topics of websites about the school and university include a wide range of problems relevant to modern education in English-speaking countries: crisis and education reforms, fighting bullying and discrimination, tolerance promotion, teaching schoolchildren with disabilities and special educational needs, international cooperation in education, teacher training, home learning and distance training, equal educational conditions for all categories of citizens, a model of bilingual school education, creation of a safe educational environment, effective financing of educational institutions, modernization of the material and technical base of schools and use of modern information technologies in the educational process, monitoring and improving the quality of educational services, shortage and professional burnout of teachers, etc.

The study of foreign presentation of the school and university theme in Internet media texts of English-speaking countries seems to us very relevant for analyzing the current state of this problem in the sociocultural, historical, cultural, and media education aspects.

## 2. Materials and methods

The material of our research is websites (state and educational websites, educational websites, business and thematic sites, forums, blogs, personal websites of teachers and school principals, websites of pedagogical associations, pedagogical journals and newspapers), containing media texts about school and university and created in the UK and the USA.

The main research methods include hermeneutic analysis of audiovisual media texts, ideological analysis, stereotype analysis, identification analysis, iconographic analysis, plot analysis, character analysis, anthropological, retrospective and gender analysis.

By the “hermeneutic analysis” of the cultural context of a media text we understand “a study of the media text interpretation process, cultural and historical factors, affecting the point of view of media texts agency / author and the audience view. The hermeneutic analysis suggests comprehension of a media text by comparison with the cultural tradition and reality; penetration into the logic of a media text; media text analysis based on artistic images comparison in the historical and cultural contexts” (Fedorov, 2017: 11). At the same time, by an “Internet site” we understand “a set of pages united by a common theme, design, having an interconnected system of links located on the Internet” (Knyazev, 2002: 247).

The purpose of our research is to identify contemporary cultural and historical, socio-economic tendencies in the evolution of public opinion and attitudes towards the organization and functioning of the system of secondary and higher education in English-speaking countries – the United States and Great Britain; to reveal socio-political, socio-economic, cultural and historical, and moral contexts of media texts of this period; determine the role and value of the topic of national education in the cultural, anthropological, gender and media education aspects.

## 3. Discussion

Quite a number of Russian and foreign books and research publications have been devoted to the analysis of Internet content and modern ICT in educational, media education and cultural contexts (Zapevalova, 2008; Drankevitch et al., 2008; Catts, Lau, 2008; Soldatova et al., 2013; Gorski, 2013; Fedorov, 2014, 2015; Ribble, 2015; Mikhaleva, 2014; 2016; Heitner, 2016; Sheperis, Davis, 2016; Kimberly, Cristiano, 2017; Sales, 2017; Kotch, Cosentino, 2018; Magette, 2018; et al.). In particular, the scholars and experts focused their attention on such aspects as Internet in the context of education and media education; Internet as a socialization factor of schoolchildren; opportunities for education, development and enlightenment provided by Internet resources; online risks and cyber-threats, Internet safety of schoolchildren; development of media culture, media competence and digital literacy among the younger generation and the competencies required for the so-called “digital citizens”; schoolchildren and social media; secret virtual life of

teenagers; Internet addiction among schoolchildren, risk factors and ways to protect children and youth against unwanted media content.

However, the analysis of media images of school and university created on Internet sites both in Russia and abroad (including English-speaking countries) has not been sufficiently presented in research literature so far. We managed to find only some rare examples of the hermeneutic analysis of media production about school and university in Russian publications (Fedorov et al., 2017, 2018; Muryukina, 2017; Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2018; Mikhaleva, 2017, 2018). Obviously, this theme requires further research and scientific analysis.

#### 4. Results

##### *Historical and sociocultural contexts*

Despite many years of experience and rich traditions in public education, the current situation in the national education system of English-speaking countries is experiencing a serious crisis caused by a variety of socio-economic and cultural-historical reasons.

In our opinion, the main contradiction lies in the obvious paradoxical policy of contemporary reformers of the education system: the forced total modernization of school education, often characterized by very stringent measures against educational institutions that fail to meet the requirements of new educational standards, is performed in the context of chronic underfunding and constant budget cuts in school education, closing of schools with low education quality indicators.

Also, the situation is complicated by a long-standing contradiction between the private and public sectors of the national education. In the UK, this problem is being addressed through partial democratization of elite private educational institutions, universities involvement in solving the problem of quality mass education, financial support of advanced “beacon schools” and fining of “failing” schools, which is called a fair redistribution of public funds.

In the USA, this confrontation concerns the so-called “charter schools” and traditional high schools. Charter schools are new prestigious experimental schools that receive government financing, but are run independently and are not required to meet the general school regulations. On the other hand, they are supposed to guarantee high-quality education. That is why they are given much freedom from the government and can use different innovations (Bokova, 2016).

In fact, initially it so happened that charter schools have always been in a better position than state high schools since unlike ordinary public schools, they have the right to expel low-achieving students and not to accept students with disabilities whose low achievement results could spoil the ratings of these schools. In addition, as stated on the analytical website *Odyssey*: “There is no requirement for where taxpayer dollars are spent in charter schools. This means tax money is going to a school who can do God-knows-what with it, while traditional public schools are suffering from the lack of funding” (<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/problems-charter-schools>).

According to a teacher from a New York School, the modern school is experiencing a number of related social and economic problems that worsen the situation in American education in general: “high attrition rates of students and teachers, dangerous working conditions, widespread suspensions, harassment of teachers, bullying and violations against students with disabilities, nepotism, and fraud” (Rodov, 2018).

##### *Political, ideological and world outlook contexts*

We believe that the content analysis of media texts about school and university education deserves special attention in terms of the dominant philosophy of education, social order in education in English-speaking countries and modern strategies for reforming the system.

The content analysis of English-language websites created in the UK and the USA has shown that the theme of school and post-secondary education is in the focus of state and public organizations, especially in the context of current reforms and modernization of the national education system. At the same time, both long-standing traditions in education and the implemented reforms receive a deep critical understanding on Internet sites of English-speaking countries.

For example, at the height of the education reform in the 2000s the acute situation in the American school system did not go unnoticed by teachers who in 2010 applied a collective petition to President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan on the website *Care2* (<https://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/supportededucation>) – a project named *Teachers’ Letters to*

*Obama*. They expressed their negative attitude to the state educational reform – *Race to the Top* (DOE, 2009) in this open letter as opposed to numerous positive reports and publications officially published by the education authorities, thus exposing some vexed problems of the new policy of American education. They clarified their position as follows:

- *meaningful education reform must embrace a range of assessments* since effective reform of education should include a comprehensive system for assessing students that does not reduce the entire learning process to “test prep” focused on students’ passing multiple-choice tests; they also opposed the use of the so-called “merit pay” based on standardized test scores;

- *school teachers must be held accountable through rigorous in-classroom evaluations by trained evaluators;*

- *teachers must work collaboratively to improve pedagogy and create thoughtful curriculum;*

- *teachers become invested in their work when they are given the opportunity to participate in school-wide decision-making and to be creative and thoughtful in their classrooms;*

- *public schools must be fully funded.* Charter schools must be held accountable to the same regulatory supervision and should not be funded at the expense of most challenged public schools;

- *any vision of effective education reform must assume that skills be taught in a way that induces critical thinking, encourages curiosity, inspires the imagination, and emphasizes discussion.* Music, art and technology are an essential part of this vision. Students should love learning, feel empowered by their educations, and should not experience schooling as something punitive;

- *improvement or turn-around programs for struggling schools must be flexible and participatory.* Teachers, students, and community members need to be involved in discussions and problem-solving (<https://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/supportededucation>).

According to ordinary high school teachers working in America, they suffer from tremendous pressure from the state controlling bodies, and this policy of total control resembles a “witch-hunt”: the current system of monitoring and rating of teachers primarily based on student standardized test scores has already allowed to lay off hundreds of the so-called “ineffective” teachers. In 2010, a young popular high school teacher from Los Angeles committed suicide after the *Los Angeles Times* had published an evaluation of his work and labeled him as “less effective” and “average” in regards to his ability to raise his students’ test scores. This caused a wave of outrage and protest in the pedagogical circles. The *LA Times* used a methodology called *value-added analysis* to evaluate Los Angeles school teachers and then printed the scores. Teachers and education experts call this method “highly unscientific and inaccurate” as it fails to measure a lot of other factors that can also affect students’ academic progress such as “students coming to school hungry or going through traumatic family experiences such as divorce or the death of a loved one” (Feldman, 2010).

The policy of privatizing school education and making schools fiercely compete with each other for state funding did not find support among the broad pedagogical community in the following years and caused mass strikes of teachers across America. News about teacher walkouts dominated the headlines of the CNN website about the current events in education which sounded like military reports: *West Virginia teachers still on strike; lawmakers try to reach pay deal* (Jorgensen , Sterling, 2018); *Teacher walkouts: Battles in Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona* (Andone, 2018); *Where dissatisfied teachers are taking action next* (Hanna, 2018); *Teachers in Arizona and Colorado are rallying for school funding* (Andone , Hanna, 2018); *Arizona teachers walk out in latest red-state revolt* (Weir, 2018); *Here's what teachers accomplished with their protests this year* (Yan, 2018), etc.



**Fig. 1.** CNN Website photo of teachers walkouts in Oklahoma and Kentucky (<https://edition.cnn.com/us/live-news/teachers-walkout-oklahoma-kentucky>)

The teachers' protests concerned not only unpopular educational and financial policies of the government, but also mass and violent shootings and killings in USA high schools; the last occurred in Texas and Florida. In this connection, mass walkouts of teachers against the use of armed violence in schools of Arizona, West Virginia and other states resumed. In February 2018, after the sad events in Florida, an organization of public activists, mainly students, teachers and parents named *Never Again* was established. Their mission is "to serve people in danger, connecting at-risk individuals and communities with industrial-grade tech solutions to face some of the boldface problems of our shared world" and "strengthen public safety and respond to violence and harm in real time" (<http://neveragain.org>).

In the context of the current education reforms the creators of the website *Edutopia* (<https://www.edutopia.org>) distinguish 6 core strategies for innovation and reform in learning:

- 1) *comprehensive assessment of student ability* – social, emotional, and academic achievement through various measures, including portfolios, presentations, and tests, multiple learning styles;
- 2) *integrated studies* – academic subjects are presented in an interdisciplinary fashion that reflects modern knowledge and society.
- 3) *student centered project-based learning* involving meaningful activities that examine complex, real-world issues;
- 4) *social and emotional learning* based on cooperative learning;
- 5) *teacher development*;
- 6) *technology integration* combined with new approaches to education and a more personalized style of learning (<https://www.edutopia.org/about/core-strategies>).

Practicing teachers and school officials share real stories about schools on the website *The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession* (<https://cstp-wa.org>). They write about shootings in American schools and an urgent need to create a safe school environment for schoolchildren (Olmos, 2018; Kragen, 2018); some of them boast of their students' academic achievements (Towbin, 2017; Cruden, 2018); some stories are about teacher leaders – active teachers who are genuinely interested in the improvement of their schools and the system of education as a whole (Olmos, 2018); some complain about old school buildings and poor infrastructure investment (Jordan, 2018); others explain the opportunities of using new educational technologies, project work, ICT in schools (Towbin, 2017; Voigt, 2017; Olmos, 2018); some teachers dwell upon the growing stress and pressure experienced by school administration, teachers and students in present-day schools (Olmsted, 2016); others insist on involving parents in educating and upbringing their children (Kragen, 2017; Gardner, 2017). Robert Mann's blog *Something Like the Truth* (<https://bobmannblog.com>), for example, gives a platform for teachers from Louisiana to share their stories about the long-term destructive policy of discrimination of the poor, immigrants and representatives of various minorities (<https://bobmannblog.com/2013/08/02/poverty-and-class-stories-about-students-by-their-teachers>).

On the other hand, the dominant idea of national identity and the cultivation of national values in educating the younger generation in English-speaking countries is the strategic goal of the contemporary education system both in the United States and Great Britain. The realization of this goal contradicts a complex social and cultural situation in these multinational countries, which make great efforts for the ethnic and social integration of immigrants. The assimilation and social adaptation of immigrant families, including their children, begin with their education and familiarization with the culture and values of the country and society they wish to belong to.

Putting great responsibility on schools in the development of students' tolerance and civic community, UK government, for example, applies every effort to tackle the causes of a lack of social integration. In 2014, the British Department for Education declared schools responsible for promoting community cohesion based on a sense of belonging, valuing diversity and ensuring equal opportunities. Since then the duty of all schools in England, both state and independent, has been to actively promote the 4 British values of: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. These basic British values promoted by teachers across the curriculum were supposed to become part of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The effectiveness of the implementation of this strategy has always been controlled by the *Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills* (Ofsted) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>).

*Dominating stereotype of success in the analyzed media texts* is hard work and quality education that will guarantee citizens getting a prestigious job in the future.

*Structure and narrative techniques used in the media texts*

The structure, plot, representativity, ethics, genre modification peculiarities, iconography, characters can be summarized as follows:

*Time and place of action in the media texts:* British and American educational institutions (private and state), the time of action is past and present;

*Household items and furnishing in the media texts:* private educational institutions possess superb teaching and sport facilities, are well-equipped and offer high-quality educational services. State (especially rural) schools are in urgent need of additional funding to improve the quality of education of schoolchildren.

*Genre modifications of English-language websites about schools and universities:* official sites of the state, sites of educational institutions, informational and thematic sites, forums, blogs, personal teachers' and principals' sites, sites of educators, journals and newspapers.

*Techniques of representing reality:* the characters are presented realistically; very often they are real teachers, students, their parents, school or university administration, educational experts, journalists, public observers, and other categories of citizens interested in education issues.

*Types of characters:*

– *age of characters:* the age-range is unlimited – from early childhood, school and university age-groups to retiring age;

– *level of education:* school and university students have unfinished secondary or higher education; teachers have higher education;

– *social status, profession:* students and their parents come from middle-income communities, low-income families or families of immigrants; students and teachers are from different cities (rural or urban) and schools (state or private);

– *marital status of characters:* usually is not mentioned, but some teachers come from disadvantaged or immigrant families;

– *appearance, clothes, constitution, traits of character:* school and university teachers follow the dress code of the educational institution where they work. School and university students are dressed in accordance with their social status, age and sometimes religion. Students attending private schools often wear a school uniform.

*The most typical plot transformations of media texts about school and university education:*

– *plot variant 1:* school teachers are struggling with the shortcomings of the current system of school education (budget cuts in education, inequality of schools, mass shootings in schools, illegal dismissals of teachers, etc.); they actively express their social protest together with parents and students by going on strikes, joining organizations, collecting petitions with protests for officials of the highest levels. As a result, they either seek some concessions from the education or government authorities, or get defeated in the fight against the state bureaucratic machine.



**Fig. 2.** Photo of the teacher and her pupil on the schoolteacher's website *Ms. Cassidy's Classroom Blog* (<https://mscassidysclass.edublogs.org>)

– *plot variant 2*: teachers, after frequent shootings (committed, usually by students themselves) in American schools and universities, together with their parents, are trying to create a safe environment for schoolchildren / students; they are developing ways of self-protection, for example, by teaching their students the rules of safe behavior and self-defense techniques in emergency situations of local character such as an attack on the school; teachers and students participate in simulations of emergencies to train their survival skills. As a result, proponents of the self-defense strategy help students and parents feel more protected in the educational institution.

– *plot variant 3*: students from a poor American school, representatives of national minorities, file a lawsuit against the local education officials about violating their constitutional right to receive a quality education. According to the claim, the school needs major repairs, does not meet sanitary standards, the classes are overcrowded, and students suffer from a lack of teachers and textbooks. As a result, the claim is rejected in the court since “access to literacy”, according to the judge's verdict, is not a constitutional right of American citizens.

– *plot variant 4*: UK school teachers are faced with the problem of linguistic, social, cultural and academic integration of refugee children who suffer from peer bullying, psychological trauma carried in the past, or have mental disabilities or learning difficulties due to the language barrier. Teachers together in collaboration with parents, psychologists and other specialists help this category of students adapt to a new life situation.

– *plot variant 5*: indifferent parents of students with disabilities enroll them into a regular state school instead of a specialized one where they suffer from peer bullying and teachers' incompetence; students perform poorly in school until they finally meet an understanding professional teacher who inspires and assists them to find their place in life. Later on, some of them go in for teaching and help students with similar difficulties.

– *plot variant 6*: enthusiastic teachers working in poor provincial schools do not stick only to teaching – they help and support their students from broken homes (low-income families, incomplete families, with parents deprived of parental rights or parents who are drug addicts, etc.) in every possible way. Subsequently, students either successfully finish school and enter universities, or follow in the footsteps of their disadvantaged parents.

– *plot variant 7*: students with special educational needs cannot study effectively in a private or state school due to various reasons (academic failure due to illness, language barrier, low motivation for learning, victims of cyberbullying or bullying, teachers' lack of compassion and incompetence, financial problems of their family, etc.), so parents opt to home school their children. As a result, students manage to overcome all the difficulties with the help of home schooling or distance learning specialists; many enter or are planning to go to universities.

– *plot variant 8*: American teachers become victims of the imperfect education system due to various reasons (work and paper overload, burnout, dangerous working conditions, harassment, pressure from the school administration, controlling authorities or public ratings, etc.). As a result, they either retire from school, or give up teaching, some even commit suicide...

## 5. Conclusion

The hermeneutic analysis of British and American Internet sites about school and university education has enabled us to draw the conclusions that the analyzed media texts:

- tell about an acute crisis and a controversial policy of reforming the national education system in the English-speaking countries;
- are the expression of the media texts authors' – teachers, parents, students – political and civic views, seeking to raise public awareness of problem zones of the contemporary system of national education and its reforming;
- present a wide range of urgent topics and plots about school and university education, by the way, closely related to the themes and plots of English-language television programmes, documentary and feature films;
- use a variety of genre modifications to represent reality (official sites of the state, sites of educational institutions, informational and thematic sites, forums, blogs, personal teachers' and principals' sites, sites of educators, journals and newspapers, etc.);
- realistically reflect both positive (equal educational opportunities for every citizen, struggle against racism and intolerance, tolerance promotion, creating a safe school environment, education reforms and improving the quality of education, inclusive education, international cooperation in education, use of new information technologies in the learning process, monitoring and improving the quality of educational services, etc.) and negative (budget cuts in education, bullying and cyberbullying, school shootings, teacher strikes, lack of teachers and professional burnout of teachers, etc.) aspects of social, political, cultural and educational life spheres in the English-speaking countries;
- emphasize the dominant idea of national identity and civil community cohesion and integration, cultivating national values in the process of upbringing the younger generation and promoting them across the curriculum as a core strategy for the modern system of education in the English-speaking countries.

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