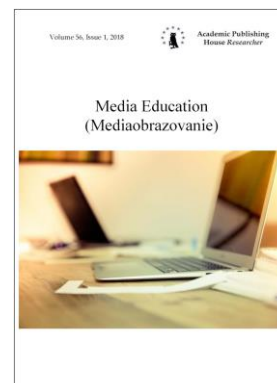


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Hermeneutic Analysis of Television Programmes of English-Speaking Countries about School and University

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Abstract

The article presents the results of hermeneutic analysis of present-day British and American television programmes about school and university. The research objective was to analyze the cultural and historical contexts, to define the role and value of the school and university topic in the mirror of television programmes of the English-speaking countries in terms of social studies, culture studies, film studies, and media education. The author of the article concludes that the analyzed British and American television production: 1) traditionally focuses on critical reevaluation of the balance between reforming and the current strategies of education in the English-speaking countries; 2) is the expression of the media texts authors' civic and political views, seeking to raise public awareness of problem zones of the national system of education and its reforms; 3) presents a wide range of urgent topics and plots about school and university; 4) uses a variety of television genre modifications to represent reality (reports, interviews, press-conferences, news bulletins, talk-shows, reality-shows, scientific and educational programmes, etc.); 5) realistically reflects both positive (multicultural education; non-discriminatory practice in education, struggle against racism and intolerance; reforming and improving the quality of education; financial support of talented youth from low-income families, etc.) and negative (budget cuts in education, bullying and cyberbullying, social exclusion and inequalities in education, a low socio-economic status of teachers, school shooting, teacher strikes, etc.) aspects of social, political, cultural and educational life spheres in the English-speaking countries; 6) emphasizes individual, public, social, political and economic value of high-quality and accessible education for every citizen of any background.

Keywords: media text, television, media education, school, university, students, teachers, UK, USA.

1. Introduction

The research explores British and American television programmes about school and university education. As the screen production genre typology is rather broad and varied the study concerns mainly BBC and CNN news programmes, cultural and educational channels, and TV programmes which reflect current events concerning the education system of the English-speaking countries.

The issues of school and university education have always been in the focus of UK television starting from the earliest black-and-white television news reports. The British film archive *British*

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Pathe contains a rich collection of newsreels and videos about schools and universities in the UK and abroad in the past. A content-analysis of the archival chronicle has revealed that camera men gave coverage to various events that took place in schools and universities of that time such as: opening of new schools (including schools for students with disabilities or special needs), members of the Royal Family entering school or college, tragic events in schools (fires, explosions, etc.), punishment in schools, advertising of sports, military and vocational schools, schools abroad, etc.

Present-day television reports about schools and universities touch upon vexed problems of the national education in the English-speaking countries such as: budget cuts and school funding crisis, British and American teachers' mass strikes and walkouts, university scandals and students' protests, traditions and reforms in education, educating students with special educational needs in schools and colleges, home schooling, ensuring good quality education, inequality and racial discrimination in schools and universities, school shooting and gun violence, lack of trained teachers and unpopularity of the teaching profession among young people...

Moreover, the UK has a long-standing tradition of broadcasting educational television programmes for different age-groups. Focus on education of British citizens is one of the priority goals of the BBC including: stimulating informal learning across a full range of subjects and issues for all audiences, engaging audiences in activities targeted to achieve specific outcomes that benefit society, promoting and supporting formal educational goals for children and teenagers and support adult education, especially related to essential skills development (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>). Hence, BBC educational channels show a wide range of learning and cultural television programmes for pre-school, primary and secondary students, university students and adult audiences. Unfortunately, due to significant funding cuts in the educational television sector in the 2000s the BBC channels featuring educational and cultural programming – *BBC Learning Zone* and *BBC Knowledge* were axed and replaced by other channels presenting mainly entertaining and recreational programmes for children and youth.

In our opinion, the research of foreign treatment and presentation of school and university education in television programmes produced in the English-speaking countries seems to us highly relevant for the analysis of the current state of the problem in terms of social studies, culture studies, and media education.

2. Materials and methods

Our research material comprises contemporary television programmes (reports, interviews, press-conferences, news, talk-shows, reality-shows, scientific and educational programmes, etc.) about school and university education in the 1990s-2000s in the English-speaking countries (UK, USA). Basic research methods include a comparative hermeneutic analysis of television audiovisual media texts relating to the topic under study (including stereotypes analysis, ideological analysis, identification analysis, narrative analysis of media texts, media text's character analysis, etc.), anthropological, retrospective and gender analyses.

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 a *television programme* we understand “a video sequence characterized by a common purpose and certain continuity (plot) that is broadcast on television” (Shesterkina, Nikolaeva, 2012).

Our 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 the television production of the English-speaking countries in terms of social studies, culture studies, film studies, and media education.

3. Discussion

Quite a number of books and research articles have been devoted to the analysis of Russian and foreign television production, including programmes intended for children and youth as a target audience (Fedorov, 2009, 2017, 2018; Sharikov, Chudinova, 2007; Rokhlin, 2008; Pertsev, 2008; Zborovsky, 2008; Ozherelova, 2009; Gyulnezerova, 2014; Bychkova, 2015; Fuller, 1994;

Dahlgren, 1995; Palmer, Young, 2003; Fisch, 2004; Livingstone, 2009; Morrow, 2006; Mittell, 2010; Matthews, Cottle, 2010).

In particular, the media experts and critics have studied such aspects as creation of a children's television programmes, popular teenage programmes, impact of television violence on the children's audience, school teachers' attitude to screen violence, children's TV addiction, television criticism as a form of citizen participation in mass media production, the future of a television educational channel, television and family life, citizenship and the media, children's learning from educational television, children's literacy development and the role of televisual texts, community television in the United States, television and American culture, selling to children, children's television in Russia and the USA and others.

However, the analysis of television programmes that created school and university media images (both Russian and foreign) has not been sufficiently presented in research literature so far. We managed to find only some rare examples of hermeneutic analysis of television production about school and university education (Bychkova, 2015; Fedorov et al., 2017; Fedorov et al., 2018; Muryukina, 2017; Mikhaleva, 2018). Obviously, this theme requires further research and scientific analysis.

4. Results

Historical and sociocultural contexts

Nowadays the government and the public at large put more emphasis on the national system of education in the English-speaking countries and the process of its constant reforming and modernization. And the mass media tend to a critical re-evaluation of the historically developed traditions in education and the current reforms to draw the public attention to the problem areas of contemporary education.

A content-analysis of BBC informational channels has shown that the issues of school and post-school education receive wide coverage and discussion on the British television, in particular, *BBC Parliament* tells the audiences (mostly adults) about the debates of MPs, often referring to education questions: the role education in society, education and the national economy, home education, education cuts, religious education, higher education tuition fees and student loans, education reforms, etc.

BBC News also includes episodes about schooling and higher education: teaching children with special educational needs and disabilities, closure of rural schools and merger of urban schools, testing in schools, integrated or shared education, new school curriculum, education staff protests, effect of Brexit on the national education, tackling extremism and teaching students tolerance, bullying and cyberbullying, fining parents and school absence, education reform problems, etc.



Fig. 1. *BBC News* (March 21, 2018): Education staff protest in Berkshire

BBC Family and Education contains episodes about various aspects of school and university education in the UK: expansion of grammar schools and faith schools, search for balance between traditions and reforms, teaching students social mobility, home education compulsory registration, making university education more inclusive, student loan rates and flexible tuition fees, school funding gaps and teacher shortages, funding pressures on schools, sex education, etc.

Modern documentary television series about everyday routine of high-school life, students' and teachers' attitudes to school as well as documentaries about school education in other countries are also very popular (High School, UK, 2012; Our School, UK, 2016).

Alongside with news reports for adult audiences the BBC gives school students aged 11 to 18 across the UK an opportunity to make and report their own news within a journalism project – *BBC News School Report*. Such news does not concern only school news (school events and accidents, wearing a school uniform, catcalling, healthy lifestyle, choosing a career, harassment, bullying, etc.) but also a wide range of topics appealing to the younger generation of UK citizens. This program with a slogan “Turn your classroom into a newsroom” is a kind of an open social platform for young reporters to share their stories and views.

Moreover, both in the UK and in the USA there are local channels belonging to schools and universities which broadcast different school/university or community events (*Clifton High School Television* (USA), *Manasquan High School Television* (USA), *Warren County Schools Television* (USA), *Temple University TV* (USA), *Cambridge University TV* (UK), *University of California Television* (USA), *Bloomsburg University Television* (UK) and others). Frequently, the school or university reports cover the local news, sporting events, school/university stage productions, health and medicine, diet nutrition and obesity, etc. Some of them broadcast interviews about student mental health, Brexit, sexism, feminism, racism, bullying, school/university traditions, student's societies, university tuition fees, freshmen experience, etc. Besides, the Open University has also been collaborating with the BBC in creating educational and cultural television programmes...

The USA system of contemporary school and university education has been determined by a number of historic, political and economic reasons that formed the national peculiarities of the American education system: “*multicultural character of education, non-discriminatory practice in education, practice-oriented utilitarian approach to education, incessant monitoring control of educational institutions by authorities and the public, collaboration of schools with various partnership organizations, public nature of education*” (Mikhaleva, 2018: 88).

Present-day CNN news also abounds with episodes describing the current conditions of school and university education in the USA, but they are more alarming and sensational: teachers' walkouts and nationwide fight for more education funding; charging parents for child neglect, torture and abuse; college fraud investigations; exploitation of university teachers; racist attacks and racial disparities in school discipline practices; students' and teachers' protests against gun violence, etc.

But the most thrilling news was surely related to mass and inhumane shootings and murders in USA schools, the latest occurred in Texas and Florida. As a result, the mass media showed how school teachers and students walked out in massive protests against gun violence in high-schools and for stricter gun laws in Arizona, West Virginia and other states. The reaction of US president Donald Trump was also broadcast in the media, as he said mass shootings have been “going on too long in our country” (CNN, May 18, 2018). In fact, the solution to the problem has not been found yet, except for ...“Trump tweets support for arming teachers” (CNN, February 24, 2018).

If we are to believe the CNN news reports a wave of teachers' nationwide strikes covered the country: tens of thousands of dissatisfied teachers walked out in April and May 2018 in Oklahoma, North Carolina, Colorado, Kentucky and other American states in protest against poorly equipped classrooms and for more education funding. They demanded higher pay, better benefits and more money for education.

It is well known that state teachers' unions in the US are rather strong and stand for teachers' rights. The complex current situation regarding mass teachers' walkouts all over the country is widely covered in the press and on television. Ultimately, they have made significant progress in getting their demands satisfied though it always means a fierce fight with the local education authorities. For example, Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin was forced to sign a bill which gave teachers a pay raise and soon afterwards compared their demand for more education funding to “a teenage kid that wants a better car” (CNN, March 4, 2018) which caused outrage and further protests...

But, on the other hand, sometimes watching US television programmes one can come across quite amusing news, for example, a news report about a school district in Oregon accused of forcing students to read the Bible as punishment for breach of discipline (CNN, May 11, 2018), or another example, – a report about a Texas school district using billboards in Oklahoma to recruit teachers...



Fig. 2. CNN News (May 9, 2018): A billboard advertising teacher vacancies in Oklahoma

Political and ideological contexts

A content-analysis of television interviews about school and university education can enable us to define the dominant philosophy of education, social procurement in education of the English-speaking countries and contemporary strategies of education reforms.

For instance, Andrew Marr when interviewing PM Theresa May in the *Andrew Marr Show* (BBC, March 30, 2017) touched upon among others a very serious question of education in England being “badly underfunded”. In response, Theresa May retorted that, “in fact, the level of funding going into schools is at record levels – something like £41 billion this year”. Although, the interviewer protested by reminding the Prime Minister that the funding actually had decreased due to the increased number of pupils. The Prime Minister also confessed that their next objective was “introducing a greater degree of fairness in the way in which schools are funded” and “to bring a fairer system of funding”.

The British Prime Minister also shared her views on the education reform strategy in her speech to *BBC News* in September 2016. The key aspects of reforming concerned the following issues: enhancing the quality of school education; accessibility of quality education for all British citizens; lack of good schools; university support, sponsoring or setting up new good schools; expansion of faith schools, their ethnical and social integration; promoting multicultural and multireligious education; ensuring social justice and democratization of the private sector of education and higher education; helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds; creating a dynamic school system where schools support one another. In the end, Theresa May proclaimed a very ambitious slogan defining the new political and social mission of the government: “Building a country that works *for everyone*”. In the context of the national education it means creating a country “where everyone has a fair opportunity to go as far as their talent and hard work will allow – a country of great meritocracy – where advantage is based on merit, not privilege”.

A year later in her interview to ITV programme – *This Morning* (February 19, 2018) she also commented on a number of other issues related to schools and universities: rising university tuition fees and the problem of student loans and debts; tackling school students’ mental health problems; fighting school bullying and cyberbullying. According to the British Prime Minister, university tuition fees cannot be decreased or abolished for several reasons: firstly, universities are free to set up their own tuition fees, secondly, it can be justified as a kind of investment in their future career: “those who will benefit from going to a university should make a contribution”. Besides, average taxpayers (who themselves might not have higher education) must not pay for somebody’s future well-being.

As for the problem of creating secure schools and protecting students’ mental health, the government launched special programs and initiatives to train school member how to deal such issues, for example, how to work with pupils suffering from psychological problems (anger management, cooperation with peers, social integration of the so-called “difficult” teenagers, etc.).

The problems of bullying and cyberbullying are also taken into consideration: the government in collaboration with different social partners and organizations worked out special strategies and programmes to ensure children and youth online and offline safety...

Giving a speech at Derby College (*BBC Parliament*, February 19, 2018), Theresa May figuratively called higher education “a key that unlocks the door to a better future”, thus

underlining the importance of accessible quality tertiary education for economic and technological development of the country. Though PM Theresa May had to confess that the British system of higher education is the most expensive in the world, she insisted on giving up the outdated attitudes that higher education is exclusive and elite and proclaimed that they “must have an education at all levels that serves the needs of every child”. In her higher education review she also called for paying more attention to technical and vocational training. Moreover, the new educational strategy – life-long learning – also means further development of distance learning and extramural education of British people.

Speaking of the imperfect system of secondary education and the urgent need for raising school standards, she offered to implement innovative approaches to education as it is being done in “free schools” to realize the full potential of students with different social, financial and physical educational capacities.

In the end, Theresa May emphasized the accessibility of education, making the education system more flexible and fair, creating equal educational and career opportunities for people from all walks of life, so that “everyone gains the skills they need to get a good job and a happy and fulfilled life”. Finally, she resumed that they needed to make Britain a great meritocracy, free from class distinctions and social barriers (sounds almost like a communist slogan!) where the power in the country belongs to the most talented and qualified specialists regardless of their social background. This key idea has been repeated by the British Prime Minister many times in other interviews concerning the new education reform...

On the other hand, it also seems reasonable to analyze the television interviews given by average teachers and educators to look at the situation as if from the inside. Teachers’ problems are less global and more specific. They concern fair and punctual payment, increased pressure of OFSTED officials and inspectors on schools and the teaching staff, imperfect system of testing (rote learning practice), catastrophic diminishing of teachers’ social status and authority, rightlessness and lack of trained teachers, professional burnout of teachers. In this regard, the teachers split into two groups: those who surrendered under the pressure of the system and those who are still full of enthusiasm and ready to put into practice the new education strategy of the conservative government.

A vivid example of the latter group is a number of interviews given by a famous school teacher, sociologist, writer and a public figure – Katharine Birbalsingh in the BBC programmes *Newsnight* (November 24, 2010), *Good Morning Britain* (November 17, 2016), *Breakfast* (May 30, 2018) and others.

On the one hand, she criticizes the shortcomings of the modern British system of liberal education based on excessive and unjustified political correctness, permissiveness and moral relativism which caused, in her opinion, the mass teenage riots in London and other big UK cities in August 2011. At the Conservative Party annual conference on 5 October, 2010 in Birmingham broadcast by *BBC Parliament* she criticized the UK failed education system: “My experience of teaching for over a decade in five different schools has convinced me beyond a shadow of a doubt that the system is broken, because it keeps poor children poor”. Katharine Birbalsingh deservedly bears the title of “the strictest headmistress in Britain” who founded together with her fellow-thinkers their own free school for disadvantaged pupils in London – *Michaela Community School*, well-known for its strict rules, dress-code and uniform, detentions, focus on systematic learning and doing homework. The teaching staff of the school are promoting their innovative teaching methods and ideas of upbringing the younger generation.

Nevertheless, acting as a virulent critic of the current system of education she is an education expert and adviser of the leading Conservative Party. And that suggests the idea that she is politically engaged and involved in realizing a certain social procurement in secondary education...

The world outlook of the characters in the analyzed media texts

The characters of the media text under study are mostly school students, university students, parents, school and university teachers, educational experts, political and public figures, journalists. Their world outlook is varied and depends on the target of the programme participant, for example, officials of the ruling political party, shill journalists and committed educational experts demonstrate confidence and optimism, trying to persuade the viewers that the educational reforms of the government are correct and successful.

Journalists interviewing officials, politicians, teachers are either neutral or opposing the ruling power. Frequently, they choose (or pretend) to show distrust, skepticism or pessimism towards the current state of education or reforms.

On the one hand, teachers rejecting the educational policy of the government protest against educational officials' abuse of power and criticize the negative aspects in the national system of education. On the other hand, pro-government teachers actively promote and propagandize the new educational strategy, call for "revolution" in the minds of people, striving to make breakthrough in public consciousness and educational practices.

On the whole, students and parents are ambivalent about the national system of education: those who suffer from the imperfect education system stand upon their rights (sometimes even in the court) with different forms of protest, others, on the contrary, take interest in new schools and innovative teaching methods.

Dominant values in the media texts: speaking of teachers, students and parents as a target audience of television programmes about school and university, they are told insistently about the importance of high-quality education as an individual, social and national benefit accessible to every citizen regardless of their social and financial status.

Regrettably, most often the social and economic value of education is only proclaimed in the analyzed media texts as a populist slogan of the ruling political party or as a utopian liberal idea such as creating a great society of meritocracy free from class prejudices and social barriers, – a society of equal and unlimited educational opportunities accessible for every citizen in present-day capitalism.

Dominating stereotype of success: hard work and quality education that will open up a gateway to the future and guarantee the citizens improved life and career prospects.

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: studios for school and university students; the action period is the present time (sometimes it is a live broadcast); for the general public – a studio, school or university.

Household items and furnishing in the media texts: are often stereotyped – school classrooms and corridors, university lecture halls, courts, campus, the dean's office...

Genre modifications of UK and USA television programmes about school and university education: reports, interviews, press-conferences, news bulletins, talk-shows, reality-shows, scientific and educational programmes, etc.

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

Types of characters:

– *age of characters:* the age-range is not limited – from early childhood, school and university age-groups to retiring age;

– *level of education:* anchormen and journalists have higher 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; students and teachers are from different cities (rural or urban) and schools (state or private); officials, politicians (mostly belonging to the ruling party), MPs.

– *marital status of characters:* is not mentioned.

– *appearance, clothes, constitution, traits of character, speech:* characters and anchormen in television programmes about school and university are neatly dressed and according to the fashion, grownups follow the dress-code, the women's make-up is low-key. The male characters wear suits and ties. Students often wear a school uniform.

Plot transformations in media texts about school and university:

– *plot variant 1:* a dissatisfied teacher or members of the teaching staff fight with some imperfections of the education system (walk out, bring into court, etc.), they put forward demands (against budget cuts in education, pay rise, gun violence, etc.). As a result, they either get their

demands partly satisfied (for example, they gain suit at law) or suffer a defeat but, in any case, they manage to catch the public eye;

– *plot variant 2*: a young dissatisfied but enthusiastic teacher leaves an imperfect ordinary state school and opens her own new (free) school together with her adherers; they explore and implement innovative methods of teaching, succeed in teaching and share their positive experience with other teachers;

– *plot variant 3*: school teachers (either young or experienced) cannot stand the “pressure” of the education system or due to professional burnout either quit teaching or continue teaching beyond the state system of education, for example, in the private education sector (private schools, tutoring, etc.);

– *plot variant 4*: school students tell the viewers about difficulties in learning, the way they cope with school problems, learn to communicate with peers and behave properly. Teachers, tutors and school administration help them to overcome the difficulties;

– *plot variant 5*: a school student with special needs is deprived of the opportunity to study at school for a long time due to financial delays of the local education officials. The results of a special investigation uncover that a number of other young people experienced similar delays. In the end, the officials make public apologies, promise to learn from the case and review their practice;

– *plot variant 6*: two British teenagers are on trial and accused of plotting a shooting attack on pupils and teachers; though the boys deny conspiracy to murder, it turns out that the elder teenager wrote in his diary that he had been inspired by a massacre in some American school; psychologists state that his diary reflects his “homicidal state of mind”;

– *plot variant 7*: parents of a multi-child family are facing charges of child neglect, torture and abuse after their children; the parents deny wrongdoing in their interviews with local mass media;

– *plot variant 8*: students occupy the university administration building for several days in protest at misappropriated financial aid funds and demand answers in the financial aid scandal; the police is investigating the case;

– *plot variant 9*: a scandal about bullying in a state school erupts in mass media; parents initiate an internal investigation; the school administration examines the circumstances by talking to school students and engaging parents and the police.

5. Conclusion

The hermeneutic analysis of British and American television programmes about school and university education has enabled us to draw the conclusions that the analyzed British and American television production:

– traditionally focuses on critical re-evaluation of the balance between reforming and the current strategies of education in the English-speaking countries;

– is the expression of the media texts authors’ civic and political views, always seeking to raise public awareness of problem zones of the national system of education and its reforms;

– presents a wide range of urgent topics and plots about school and university education;

– uses a variety of television genre modifications to represent reality (reports, interviews, press-conferences, news bulletins, talk-shows, reality-shows, scientific and educational programmes, etc.);

– realistically reflects both positive (multicultural education; non-discriminatory practice in education, struggle against racism and intolerance; reforming and improving the quality of education; financial support of talented youth from low-income and disadvantaged families, etc.) and negative (budget cuts in education, bullying and cyberbullying, social exclusion and inequalities in education, a low social and economic status of teachers, aggression and school shooting, teacher strikes, etc.) aspects of social, political, cultural and educational life spheres in the English-speaking countries;

– emphasizes individual, public, social, political and economic importance and value of high-quality and accessible education for every citizen regardless of their social status and origin.

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