

# Humanitarian Resistance in Russian Higher School during the Pandemic: The Case of Journalism Education

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**Abstract:** The article examines a relatively new phenomenon of humanitarian resistance, which is becoming widespread in higher education. It represents an intellectual and practical pedagogical reaction to the expansion of technocracy, digitalization and commercialization at universities. These trends have intensified in the context of the pandemic. The case of journalistic education in Russia has been selected for the actual study. The main material for observations was obtained through expert interviews with leading teachers of a number of universities; to verify the conclusions, the authors use theoretical works and discussions in the pedagogical community. As a result of the analysis, it turns out that teachers mostly vote for the spiritual and cultural values of education and consider it essentially important to conduct active interpersonal communication within traditional forms of classes. In this regard, their position coincides with the mood of the students' parents, as sociological surveys revealed.


## 1 INTRODUCTION

Currently, the practice of educational institutions is experiencing the modifying effect of several factors that interact and mutually reinforce each other. In particular, this relates to the COVID-19 pandemic and the explosive development of digital information technologies. Obeying the dictates of the pandemic, education is moving to a remote format, and this entails the use of digital remote communications. Based on the experience of recent months, a significant part of parents of schoolchildren are opposed to replacing direct communication with the teacher with computer dialogues. So, according to a survey of residents of 20 cities in Russia, most parents are confident that this will negatively affect the health and psyche of their children, the assimilation of educational materials and communication skills with peers (Solodovnikov, 2021). In turn, teachers of the Russian higher school say that with the transition to the distance format, they have less free time and increased workload, they do not consider the distance

format comfortable for themselves and for students; 87.8% of teachers surveyed believe that it is better to conduct classes in full-time format (Shtykhno, Konstantinova and Gagiev, 2020, p. 76).

Meanwhile, higher school teachers express concern about another trend that has an international character. The dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences from University of Helsinki Hannu Nieminen writes: "Both scholars and policymakers largely agree that in the last 20 years European higher education policy has turned from policy based on democracy and culture towards policy driven by market-based ideals" (Nieminen, 2018, p. 73). Thus, at the initiative of the management bodies of educational system and specific universities, a change in strategic guidelines is added to medical and technological factors. The Russian pedagogical community identifies this danger and responds to it intellectually. Pedagogical community has generated a concept of humanitarian resistance to reduction of the humanitarian component in education in favor of technologization and client-oriented relations. The pandemic context

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has strengthened such sentiments and teachers began to perceive digitalization "not so much as technological modernization, but ... as the loss of a meaningful component of life in favor of mechanical ... algorithms and standards" (Murzina, 2020, p. 107).

Since we are considering the case of journalism education, it must be said that in this area there is also a conjunctural pressure from the pandemic and digitalization in their alliance. It is characteristic that in 2021 World Journalism Education Congress and European Journalism Training Association changed the former title of their joint conference to "Journalism education in the era of social networks and artificial intelligence: digital technologies and ethical values" (<https://ejta.susu.ru/programme/>). In a research practice, the authors of the latest empirical projects propose a related formulation of the question: computer technology required a new organization of the journalists' labour, and the coronavirus pandemic forced educational institutions to switch to distance learning (Grabelnikov, 2020, p. 715).

However, it is difficult to agree that only technological innovations, medical conditions and commercial reasons determine the essence, forms and trends of the university journalism training. For example, it can be viewed in the light of national and cultural traditions in spiritual life, as well as in a broad system of academic activity and as an established practice that has its own internal integrity, a set of working means and methods, a hierarchy of intellectual and ethical priorities, etc. Undoubtedly, experienced mentors from Russian universities have mixed opinions regarding the impact of conjunctural and stable factors on the state and prospects of the journalism school. The purpose of this article is to identify their positions towards the preservation of the humanitarian basis of education, in particular, in the conditions of the coronavirus pandemic.

## 2 METHODS

The main method used was expert interviews with heads of departments and well-known teachers from different cities and universities of Russia. The interview scenario included different topics besides technologies and COVID but the humanitarian background of education turned out to be the leading idea of the conversations. In turn, the expert interviews were an integral part of the comprehensive research project "Theoretical and Pedagogical Schools of Journalism in Russia" (2019-2021) performed at the Department of the Theory of Journalism and Mass Communications of St.

Petersburg State University with participation of many other departments and universities in Russia and abroad. The project has been described in previous publications (Berezhnaya and Korkonosenko, 2021). A total of 10 semi-structured interviews with a video recording were conducted in 2020-2021, with average length of 40 minutes each. Deans of journalism faculties, heads of departments and professors of specialized faculties, as well as organizers of non-university professional educational projects became our experts. Additionally, the methodology includes a comparison of the collected data with concepts and assessments offered by Russian and international scholarly and pedagogical corporations.

## 3 RESULTS

First of all, the interlocutors speak in solidarity in support of the humanitarian basis of journalistic education, for example, in such forms:

*"Without the humanitarian component of our education, including philological one, you can't teach journalism (not media communication). One of the main skills is a competent, expressive presentation of non-banal thoughts about what is happening around."*

*"Philosophy, cultural studies, economics must necessarily be. As a result, widely educated people appear who can't write carelessly, for it is not interesting for them to write this way. An educated person has a deeper and more diverse understanding of life."*

*"We must understand that a journalist not only has basic skills, but he is a socialized person, he understands what is happening, can compare, analyze. And there is the humanitarian side of education, even the philosophical one."*

*"I am for fundamental humanitarian learning to be in the first place. For example, we have a good department of stylistics and literary editing, we pay a lot of attention to literature. Not only because we ourselves grew out of the philological faculty and many of us became candidates and doctors of philology. But also, because, after all, the word is the main thing in journalism."*

The experts see a journalist primarily in the roles of analyst, critic, and a thoughtful observer of the processes in the world around him. In this respect, the Russian paradigm of education differs significantly from foreign ones.

*"Our journalism is originally publicistic, that is, solving the eternal problems of life with the help of journalistic articles."*

*"The American and Scandinavian traditions suggest separating practical journalism from theory of journalism. I think such a separation does not help foreign colleagues. The more I look at what is happening today, the more I am convinced of it. Critical thinking, which a journalist needs, is formed fragmentally and only at the level of pragmatics, and not at the level of a systemic vision of the world."*

At the same time, anxiety about the future of the journalism school regularly arises during the interview process. It is not an easy task to divide the experts' statements into separate questions concerning threats to the humanitarian nature of education, since in spontaneous speech different topics are intertwined with each other. For example, as noted above, technocratic concepts and innovations are closely related to the circumstances introduced by the pandemic. Teachers see the most concrete manifestation of this connection in the spread of distance education online.

*"The experience of working in isolation, at a distance showed how teachers and students long for direct communication. Apparently, distance learning is both useful and necessary as an additional tool, especially if we are talking about some kind of courses that cannot be studied in any other way. But distance cannot be a substitute for direct communication. Particularly when it comes to journalistic education."*

*"The leading universities included in the top global rankings offer their online classes. Globalization is globalization, but people always live in a particular place and study at a particular university. And, probably, we need to talk about glocalization. But despite this, students are still striving for a real place, for real teachers, not virtual ones. They strive for communication. The experience of teaching in self-isolation has shown this once again."*

There is reason to worry that the use of distance learning instead of real communication will increase. For instance, at St. Petersburg State University, since 2017, both basic and optional disciplines (Philosophy, History of Russia, Fundamentals of University Life) have been included in the curricula of the Bachelor of Journalism in electronic format. The list of them in master's programs is expanding, in 2020 the number of online courses ranged from 10 to 15 percent of the total number of courses and cover

all university-wide disciplines, including elective blocks, and after the choice of elective courses online disciplines take up to 30 percent in the schedule of students. Qualified teachers in no way deny technical progress, they realistically assess and accept the need for changes, including personnel renewal.

*"It is important for us that a teacher being a practitioner is able to work in new conditions. It is important to be ready to keep up with the times. There are many experienced journalists of the old formation who find no strength to step over their old habits and learn to work using new tools."*

*"Traditionally, we are very text-centric, but at the same time we must be technological, understand new technologies, somehow fit them into our traditions."*

Opposition is being caused by attempts to use progressive technologies to unify knowledge and competencies, which inevitably arises as soon as the diversity of personalities in the educational process is lost and the direct interaction of the student with the teacher is reduced. Actually, the humanization of education is provided primarily by the interaction of human individuals within it.

*"Unification is a bad future. The unification in humanitarian university education is, you know, just the death of education completely."*

Surely, the damage from the unification orientation in education increases significantly when it is coupled with similar requests from the industry. Universities face such requests for simplified qualification.

*"The labor market is beginning to demand: we need the identical specialists with the identical set of technological skills, the identical understanding of their duties for those editorial offices that earn money."*

On the other hand, a purely commercial interpretation of journalistic work in business echoes commercialization and pragmatization in arrangement of production processes at universities. Journalism teachers see these trends no less clearly than representatives of other fields of education.

*"The commercialization of education leads to that we accept everyone. I do not know how to teach in these conditions. We must close our eyes to the fact that there is a swamp. And the function of upbringing goes away completely."*

*"We accept a large number of first-year students, this happens simultaneously with the reduction of the teaching staff. There is less and less time for individual work"*

Thus, the entrepreneurial strategy of the universities' functioning and development comes into conflict with the humanitarian mission of education. This conclusion clearly follows from the interview participants' speeches.

## 4 DISCUSSION

It should be said, firstly, that none of the interlocutors used the notion of "humanitarian resistance", however, secondly, that their attitudes and views correspond to this concept in essence. This correspondence is manifested in the very understanding of the humanitarian nature of education. According to the researchers of the modern higher school, "the humanitarization of education can be defined as a directed pedagogical process that takes into account the features of the emergence and creative development of the individual ... ensuring the development of a humanitarian orientation of an individual, capable of self-determination and self-realization in the contemporary sociocultural space" (Elkanova, 2017). It was these areas of training and graduate qualities that the interview participants emphasized. Moreover, the special kind of activity of a journalist strengthens the accents, since the profession encourages him express himself openly in the environment of social communication.

Russian professors declare the priority importance of the socio-cultural component in journalistic education. According to them, "contemporary journalism requires professionals, whose education is based on three basic pillars: knowledge of the society and its culture, knowledge of the nature of journalism, and knowledge of professional skills. Two pillars were present in the USSR already, and have been transformed into a new post-Socialist and digital reality of the Russian journalism education" (Vartanova, 2017, p. 22). There are also proposals to strengthen the cultural content of curricula, for example, to increase the role of aesthetics in the structure of professional qualification. "The combination of aesthetic and functional components in professional training meets the challenges of the modern media market, expands the range of professional practices, gives hope for humanistic perspectives of the industry" (Berezhnaia, 2019, p. 207).

Some foreign researchers also emphasize that it is impossible to limit educational programs to utilitarian instrumental training: "The role of the university is to prepare students not only to be employed but also to

participate effectively and critically in the democratic community" (Reese and Cohen, 2000, p. 214). However, the ideas of Russian colleagues go far beyond democracy, they operate with categories of humanistic philosophy and humanitarian priorities of the profession. Particularly, these motives are clearly heard while discussing pedagogical strategies: "The education of future professional journalists on the samples of a great worldview style, anthropocentrism, is seen as a promising educational strategy" (Poelueva, Indrikov and Belyatskaya, 2016, p. 13).

Let us emphasize that we are talking about the Russian model of journalistic activity and related education, whereas other national systems may have other guidelines. Alignment according to some universal international model not only does not promise achievements and advantages, but it is also impossible for deep reasons of civilizational differences. Broadly speaking, "Russia is often considered a civilization of its own" and in this connection, social science in Russia is not internationally "convertible" (Shirokanova, 2012, p. 269). Some Western scholars accentuate cultural and civilizational differences in relation to the journalistic school: "Entrenched ideological beliefs about totalitarian control over the academia prevented Western scholars from readily examining the broader historical and cultural context in which university journalism education developed in Russia" (Antonova, Shafer and Freedman, 2011, p. 140). In this context, Russian scientists reasonably advocate continuity in the functioning of domestic journalism schools and their development on their own methodological basis, which has humanitarian design (Blokhin, Korkonosenko and Khubetsova, 2015, p. 108).

Comparing the content of expert interviews with theoretical ideas and assessments shows that they have common vectors of thought movement. Education is considered in the coordinates of fundamental academic training saturated with cultural, socio-moral and, in general, humanitarian meanings. Naturally, these pedagogical attitudes resist technocratic and entrepreneurial intentions, the intensive spread of which is provoked by the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Humanitarian resistance in higher education is not a local special case, but a widespread phenomenon, at the level of views, moods and practical pedagogical

activity. It is directed against excessive technicalization (primarily digitalization) and commercialization of university life, in defence of the values of enlightenment, interpersonal interaction and the qualitative diversity of educational practice. The COVID-19 pandemic generates a favourable environment for the growth of negative trends, which is most clearly manifested in the expansion of online distance learning. Based on the material of journalistic education in Russia, it is clear that the teaching community for the most part adheres to the humanistic pedagogical ideology and strives to implement it in current work.

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