

MEDIA COVERAGE OF EXAMINATION RESULTS, PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS, AND THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION PROFESSION

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Summary

Over the past thirty years or so there has been a proliferation in the news coverage that examination issues receive. This coverage has specifically focussed upon examination results as a means of assessing examination standards. Each August the debate regarding whether or not higher pass rates indicate falling or rising educational standards is played out in the print and broadcast news media. This paper uses a sociological framework to examine the content of examination news items, public perceptions of examination standards, and the role of educators in the news coverage examination issues receive. It is argued that an understanding of these issues is key to improving the annual news coverage of examination results. Equipped with such information those responsible for educational assessment could develop effective strategies for interacting with the media. Possible avenues for future research are discussed.

Introduction

“Thirty years ago few national and virtually no local papers employed specialist education correspondents. Now the broadsheets have at least two, the tabloids one apiece...”

(Jeffs, 1999: 165)

The publication of A-Level and GCSE results each year has increasingly attracted media attention. Examination results guarantee a story of national interest because large sections of the population, whether students parents or teachers, hold a direct stake. To many the month of August has become known as the ‘media silly season’: newsrooms across the nation struggle to find newsworthy items to report over this quieter period and inevitably examination results take the spotlight (Murphy, 2004). Even small fluctuations in the pattern of results can become the subject of sensational reporting. Murphy has commented that typical examination story headlines contain assertions that: educational standards are falling; examinations are getting easier; more students achieving top grades must be a bad thing; and the increased participation and success of students in schools, colleges and universities will lead to poorer standards. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the media are increasingly extending their results coverage to include a scrutiny of the technicalities of examination board grading (Warmington and Murphy, n.d).

It is arguable that the news media has turned its attention to education because it has become a political battleground. McCaig (2004) examined the increase in popular concern over state education in the UK since the 1970s. His analysis of polling data, election manifestos and legislation priorities revealed that political discourse has progressively become more focussed

upon education, and educational 'standards' in particular. Warmington, Murphy and McCaig (2005) specifically link the intensification of examination coverage with the advent of New Labour in 1994. The newly appointed leader of the opposition, Tony Blair claimed that *"...the public is once again ready to listen to notions associated with the left: social justice, cohesion, and equality of opportunity and community"* (Blair, 1994 :2). On gaining power in 1997, he reaffirmed the party's commitment to social justice and to education as a means to create a meritocratic society (Thrupp and Tomlinson, 2005). New Labour's first term was characterised by a focus on school standards and accountability. In the second term, an agenda was set for widening access and participation in higher education.

Similarly, Baird (in preparation) has commented that when New Labour came into power in 1997, the government's attitude to increases in examination outcomes changed overnight. Whereas, under the Conservative government increments in examination results were viewed as slipping standards, under New Labour rising outcomes were to signal a rise in standards. For Baird, the continuing debate regarding examination standards should be viewed as a 'tug of war' between modernisers (those who want to increase the numbers gaining qualifications) on the one hand, and traditionalists (those who want to maintain a highly selective function for qualifications) on the other. The culmination of the policies of successive governments has been to create a society in which the concept of educational standards has largely been transformed *"from a social goal into a consumer option for aspirational individuals"* (Warmington et al, 2005: 12). According to Murphy (2004) heightened 'consumer' expectations among parents and students, coupled with inflated media coverage, and the inherent ambiguities that are embedded within the grading of examinations, has led to a succession of annual crises over examination results.

The most serious crisis to date occurred in England in 2002, with the introduction of Curriculum 2000. The reform programme (designed to enable more candidates to obtain A-Levels) resulted in 94.3 *per cent* of candidates passing, an increase of 5 *per cent* from the previous year. Allegations that the government had manipulated grade boundaries to prevent an even higher pass rate were rebuffed, and a number of high-profile resignations ensued in order to restore public confidence in the system. Warmington et al (2005) suggest that the underlying cause of this particular crisis was the Labour government's failure to educate people about the changing role of the A-Level, for fear of recrimination of being 'soft' on standards from their political opponents. It seems that annual rises in the number gaining good passes have become a double-edged sword for the government.

The media coverage of examination results is not only an issue for the government, but also for UK awarding bodies responsible for maintaining standards over time. Cresswell (1996), Nutall (1986) and Murphy (1993) and others have commented upon the extent to which examination standards depend upon their credibility. News reports claiming a fall in standards have the potential to undermine public trust in the examining process. In turn, this may put pressure on centres to offer alternative educational routes, such as the International Baccalaureate in place of the traditional A-Level. Furthermore, a media attack on a particular examining board may affect the way in which it is perceived by the government regulatory body, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Awarding bodies operate within a competitive market place. 'Crises' linked to a particular awarding body can be detrimental to their market share, with centres shifting entries to more 'trustworthy' or 'reliable' boards. An understanding of the way in which news stories regarding examination results are constructed and current public perceptions of examination standards would be useful for a UK awarding body. It would provide

the foundations for a strategy to improve the media coverage examination issues receive year after year.

This paper uses a sociological framework to examine media coverage of examination results, (and by proxy examination standards). Sociologists are not the only academics to study the media. Political scientists often study the role of media in the political process. Literary scholars analyse the media as cultural texts. Psychologists are interested in the effect of the media on individual behaviour. Most importantly, mass communication scholars examine a wide range of issues that often focus on the structure and practice of media institutions. There is much overlap between the sociological and mass communications literature (Croteau and Hoynes, 2000). However:

“The field of mass communications is defined by a particular substantive area of interest, while sociology is a perspective that is applied to a wide range of substantive areas, including the media.”
(Croteau & Hoyes, 2000: 17)

An American sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1959), infamously stated that a sociological perspective – what he calls the “sociological imagination” – enables an analysis of the connections between “private troubles” and “public issues”. A sociological approach to the media is advantageous because, it facilitates a consideration of the role of the media at the level of the individual (the micro level) in the context of the broader social forces such as the economy, politics, and technological development (the macro level). It also emphasises the relationships (both micro and macro) between the media and the social world.

In the first part of the paper, some of the conceptual difficulties in defining what is meant by examination ‘standards’ and sociological approaches to studying media content are discussed. These background issues serve to contextualise the main body of the paper. The *News Media Depiction of A-Level and GCSE Results study* (Warmington & Murphy, 2003, 2004) is one of the few studies to perform content analysis of print and broadcast examination news items in the UK. The findings of this study, with regards to how the news media construct debates around educational issues are discussed in detail. Croteau and Hoynes (2000) advocate a sociological approach to studying the media that emphasises social relations, especially in the form of the tension between structure and agency. In addition to studying the relationships between institutions (how non-media structures, such as the government and the economy affect the media industry and vice versa) and within institutions (how the structure of the media industry impacts upon media personnel and media products and vice versa), they also note that it is important to consider how institutions influence the public. Thus, research into public perceptions of examination standards is drawn upon to address the issue of how media coverage of examination issues may influence the readers (audiences) of these media messages. The role of the education profession in the news coverage examination issues receive is also considered, as well as possible avenues for future research.

Background Issues

What do we mean by ‘standards’?

In a recent paper on alternative conceptions of comparability, Baird (in preparation) draws a distinction between what society means by examination standards and what assessment

specialists mean by examination standards. Similarly, it has been argued that standards can be conceptualised technically (as in the research and monitoring work conducted by QCA, awarding bodies and independent researchers) intuitively (as is usually the case in the annual public debate following the publication of examination results), or in a utilitarian sense (as by employers dissatisfied with the performance of qualified candidates) (QCA, 2002a). Such demarcations are helpful, as they acknowledge that definitions of standards employed by journalists are not always consistent with industry definitions.

Academics have devoted considerable effort to defining the meaning of 'standards' and how they should be measured. Baird, Cresswell and Newton (2000) reviewed some of the definitions of examination standards found in the educational assessment literature, including weak criterion referencing; simple cohort referencing; the catch-all definition; and the sociological perspective. For Baird et al (2000), the fact that there are coexisting definitions leaves examination standards open to criticism. Similar debates rarely occur in the public arena. Rather, within the public debate the term 'standard' is used to refer to a range of issues - the standard of the performance of candidates, the demand placed on candidates by the examination, the standard or (suitability) of the specification, or the expectations that are inherent in the 'meaning' of each grade (QCA, 2002a).

Interestingly, the elusiveness of the concept of standards within the public domain has led researchers interested in issues such as public perceptions of standards over time to focus upon what have been termed 'surrogate issues' (QCA, 2002a). Typical questions include 'whether students are now doing better than they did 10/20/30 years ago' or 'whether it is harder to get top grades than it was 10/20/30 years ago' or 'whether I could have passed today's examination when I was at school' (QCA, 2002a). Public perceptions of examination standards will be discussed in detail in a later section. Next, sociological approaches to understanding media content will be considered.

A Sociological Perspective

A sociological perspective recognises that journalism, in all its forms, and despite claims to truthfulness, is above all a *construction*. What's more, journalist output in contemporary capitalist societies, such as the United States and Britain, has a number of *social* determinants – those features of social life and organisation which shape, influence and constrain its form and content. The journalistic text is interpreted as a product of cultural, technological, political and economic forces, specific to a given society at a particular time (McNair, 1998).

McNair (1998), in his model of the social determinants of journalism, identified five factors of production which impact upon journalistic work. The first factor of production is the system of professional ethics, aesthetic codes and routine practices which govern journalistic work. Whilst some of these, such as the ethic of objectivity, have their origins in the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the nineteenth century, others – the current system of 'newsvalues', for example – have developed over time in response to changing market conditions, technological innovations, and subsequent changes in the demands of the contemporary newsroom. Newsvalues refer to what Boyd (1988) has termed a journalist's 'instinctive' news sense – a set of values which develop in the course of their work which allow them to select and prioritise news stories.

Second, journalists are influenced by politicians, and the political environment within which they operate. These shape the censorship, regulatory and governmental information systems in a given society, and also define the broader 'political culture'. A third production factor relates to

economics and the organisation of economic ownership in particular. The ownership of the British press, for example, is concentrated in the hands of a few publishing organisations, the largest of which – News International - is owned by Rupert Murdoch (McNair, 1999). It is widely assumed that such concentrated ownership leads to proprietorial influence over key features such as recruitment and editorial bias. A further economic factor is the impact of ever-growing media and information markets on the content of journalism. In capitalist societies journalism is a *commodity*, which must be sold to consumers in an increasingly competitive market place. This economic fact largely dictates the form, content and style of journalism.

Fourth, journalistic output is influenced by the technologies of newsgathering and production. The internet, for instance, represents a recent development in the way in which news journalists gather information. Fifth and finally, journalistic discourse is shaped by the information management activities of *extramedia* social actors. This group includes politicians, pressure group activists, celebrities of sport and screen, public organisations such as the police and trade unions, and all other manner of social actors who seek to have their views portrayed positively in the news media. McNair (1998) noted that the increased importance of this factor over recent years has given rise to a 'sociology of sources' within the broader sociology of journalism.

McNair's (1998) model of the social determinants of journalistic output embodies a number of established theoretical frameworks which sociologists have used to *explain* media content, as opposed to merely describe it. These approaches include: the economic; the political; the professional-organisational; the technological; and the culturological (what Curran (1990) calls the culturalist) (McNair, 1999). Whilst the approaches to studying media output are not mutually exclusive, they are characterised by profound differences as to the nature of the state's functioning, of journalism's role, and the concept of ideology. From one perspective, the economic base determines the form of the cultural and ideological superstructure, of which journalism is a major part. Economic, political, and managerial control of the means of intellectual production by a dominant class ensures that this class's ideology is transmitted to the rest of society and comes to dominate. In such a regime, subordinate or oppositional ideas are excluded or marginalised in the mass media. (McNair, 1999)

Culturalist perspectives, on the other hand argue that the cultural institutions of advanced capitalist societies are sites of struggle between competing ideological positions. Some groups, due to economic or political status, have greater access to these sites and, thus, their world view becomes 'hegemonic'. However, in liberal pluralist societies, the relative autonomy, objectivity and impartiality of journalistic media facilitate spaces in which subordinate ideas and alternative explanations can be heard, even if only at the outer reaches of mainstream media output. The professional-organisational perspective (and the technological, which may be viewed as a subset of the organisational) finally, tends to absolve journalists from much of the responsibility for their output by arguing that the constraints and conventions imposed on their work (whether by audience expectations, resource limitations, or the demands of deadlines) determine output over any concept of class bias:

"The journalist does what has to be done to produce the goods, within the constraints set by deadlines and competitive pressures."
(McNair, 1998:62)

Each of the theoretical frameworks discussed contributes to an understanding of how and why journalism is produced. They provide invaluable background information for any consideration of the emergence and content of examination print and broadcast news items.

News Media Depiction of A-Level and GCSE Examination Results Study

Research into the way in which examination news issues are constructed and prioritised by the media is scant. Warmington and Murphy (2003, 2004, 2005, n.d), however, have produced a number of papers detailing the findings of a pilot and subsequent study into media coverage of examination results. The *News Media Depiction of A-Level and GCSE Examination Results in 2003* primarily comprised a critical analysis of local and national print and broadcast news coverage. The underlying approach of the project was to apply critical concepts common to media studies to popular debates in education. Rather than treating the media coverage of examination results as a top-down process for disseminating ideological agendas, the authors drew upon the work of media specialists such as Bruck (1989), Cottle, (1993, 1995) and Gauntlett (2001) in examining the role of media production and presentation in delimiting the content and parameters of examination news items. In this sense, it could be argued that Warmington and Murphy's analysis was couched in a professional-organisational framework.

Warmington and Murphy (2003, 2005, n.d) argue that three particular aspects of print and broadcast reporting provide insights into the narrative and presentational processes, which serve to structure debates over education in the popular media. The first is the distribution of different headline categories and narrative themes in print and broadcast news coverage. The second is the role of *news templates* in shaping the coverage of results, where news templates are defined as:

"Structural, narrative and technical formats that exist prior to the emergence of specific news events and which are drawn upon by the news media in order to produce news 'issues' and 'debates' in readily consumable form".

(Warmington and Murphy, 2005: 3)

Thirdly, Warmington and Murphy suggest that headline and content analysis facilitate the identification of discursive features that populate dominant results coverage templates (In 2002 and 2003 the dominant template for A-Level coverage was the claim that examination standards were falling).

Although both A-Level and GCSE data were collected, Warmington and Murphy's (2003, 2004, 2005, n.d) analysis primarily focused upon the A-Level results coverage. This is understandable given the political climate at the time of research: the 2002 A-Level crises was fresh in the mind of bodies such as the then Joint Council for General Qualifications (JCGQ) and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), and the publication of the Tomlinson Report into A-Level standards (2002) was eagerly anticipated. In 2003 a total of 208 A-Level print items, and 161 broadcast items (TV and radio) were recorded. A number of dominant headline categories were identified. As in the 2002 pilot, the largest category referred to the issue of 'falling standards' (39.4 *per cent*). Headlines included claims that A-Levels were easier to pass, curriculum standards were in decline, and that reform of the A-Level system was needed. A key theme in 2003, which was linked to the falling standards debate, was the claim that pass rates were climbing because students were opting for 'softer' subjects. Headlines refuting the falling standards thesis were also included in this category. According to Warmington and Murphy (2003) the 'falling standards' headline constituted a *condensation symbol* - a term favoured by Williams (1997) to describe "*words used as a shorthand for broad*

debates and which simultaneously signify and polarise particular discourses" (Murphy and Warmington, 2003:5).

Among the other print headlines, approximately one fifth (20.7 *per cent*) were celebratory: documenting the success of individual students/schools or rejoicing the overall pass rate; 10.1 *per cent* offered students advice on HE admission, clearing and retakes; 7.2 *per cent* were deemed 'Spence' stories (in reference to Laura Spence, a high-achieving student who was notoriously turned down for a place at Oxford); 4.8 *per cent* drew attention to record pass rates; 2.9 *per cent* commented on gender disparities; and 1.9 *per cent* concerned examination boards. Broadcast coverage relied upon a smaller range of headline types, focussing only upon major issues. Over a third of item headlines (36 *per cent*) flagged the debate over falling standards. However, Warmington and Murphy (2004:4) noted that the legal requirement of impartiality in broadcast news meant that falling standards items on TV and radio were phrased with '*greater editorial distance*' than their print equivalents; they were either questioning in nature e.g. '*A-Level results are up again but are students choosing easier subjects?*' Radio Nottingham, (14/8/02), or named A-Level critics e.g. '*Bosses organisation the Institute of Directors has joined the row over whether A-Levels are too easy*' (BBC 24, 14/8/03).

In terms of the narrative content of print and broadcast news items, the most frequently cited issues were; students' experiences (of studying and examinations, receiving results, HE admissions); pass rates (reports on statistics, the increase at grade A and other trends); HE entry (admissions trends, A-Level's value as a predictor of HE performance); examination standards (standards over time and across examination systems); hard/soft subjects (comparability of standards across subject areas); examination reform (the need for examination/syllabus reform, 'examination overload') and examination boards (reassurances of the rigorousness of this year's grading, comments upon grading and administration practices).

Warmington and Murphy (2003, 2004, 2005, n.d) utilise their findings to explore the way in which news debates are constructed. Cottle (1995) identifies 'contest' and 'opposition' as the key structural/discursive templates in TV news journalism. According to Warmington and Murphy, in 2002 and 2003, the contest over 'falling standards' (whether an increase in the A-Level pass rate was indicative of a decline in examination standards and a devaluation of the qualification) formed the core dramatic content of the results coverage. Interestingly, this was in spite of the fact that the rise over the previous year's pass rate was less marked in 2003 than 2002 – a 1.1 percentage point rise compared to a 4.5 percentage point rise, respectively. Cottle attributes TV news journalism's dependence on the organising principles of 'contest' to the structures of news production. In particular, the increase in video/studio link/ video formats as a means of reducing production costs. Warmington and Murphy (n.d: 8) note that "*broadcast and print news editors' faith in the dramatic potential of contest between opposing stakeholders, as a means of securing audience interest remains an important factor.*"

Similarly, Williams (1997) examined the way in which 'public, written texts' rely upon *polarising categories*. Writing from an educationalist's perspective, he comments that:

"...public debates are constructed around "icon words" or "condensation symbols"...Such "icon" words have become embedded in "polarising discourses".
(Williams, 1997: 25)

The use of 'icon words' in the *production* of public debate serves not only to simplify debates and issues, but more importantly:

"...by using one or two key words, the unacceptability of the opposite (viewpoint)...is assumed. The processes of categorisation, of differentiation do not have to be spelled out in detail. Meanings are constructed through explicit, or more often, implicit, contrast..."
(Williams, 1997: 25-26).

Warmington and Murphy (n.d: 8) argue that whilst template repetition was clearly evident in 2003's reporting, this repetition was *"tempered by the need for 'difference': that is for the kind of novel angle capable of re-engaging audience interest"*. Thus 2003's reporting added a variant to the 'falling standards' debate, namely that this year's rise in pass rate (from 94.3 *per cent* to 95.4 *per cent*) was fuelled by a tendency for students to opt for 'soft' or 'less traditional subjects' at the expense of 'harder', 'traditional' options. The 'hard/soft' claim appeared in a quarter of print narratives (25.5 *per cent*) and over a third (37.9 *per cent*) of broadcast narratives, and typically used Media Studies and Psychology to exemplify 'soft subjects':

"Psychology, law and media studies: the "scandalous" routes to A-grade success"
(Independent, 14/8/08)

"Critics of psychology exam are challenged over "soft option" claim" (Independent, 15/08/03)

For Warmington and Murphy (n.d: 9), 'soft' and 'hard' subjects functioned as 'icon words' in 2003's A-Level coverage: they produced and polarised public debate. Comparisons between say Maths A-Level and Media Studies A-Level served as shorthand for broader ideological oppositions. They highlighted, for example, concerns about the maintenance of A-Level standards over time, by *"contrasting 'traditional' gold standard academic curriculum with 'populist' modernised curriculum"*.

In summary, Warmington and Murphy's analysis of 2002 and 2003 results coverage is founded on the proposition that the tenor of annual news report surrounding the publication of A-Level and GCSE results is as much due to custom and format (the professional-organisational approach) than shaping by ideological agendas (the economic or political approach). They conclude that:

"It is therefore possible to describe media coverage of UK assessment results as predictable, simplistic, ritualistic and based upon long established media templates".
(Warmington and Murphy, n.d: 11).

It should be noted, however, that the lifespan of the templates recorded by Warmington and Murphy (2003, 2004, 2005, n.d) remains unknown. Shannon (2002), claimed that by early 2000 the issue of 'falling standards' was already an established feature of results coverage, but the persistence of such arguments may waver in the future. Furthermore, it is possible that new templates may emerge with the onset of each publication of results. With regards to the 2002 and 2003 results coverage, Warmington and Murphy (n.d) caution that it is unwise for educationalists to underestimate the importance of the media as the key interface between the education sector and the public. The media has the potential to impact on public perceptions, and in turn, education policy.

Public Perceptions of Examination Standards

The study of media “effects” constitutes a large body of research within media studies. Much research and debate has focussed upon the way in which media messages “cause” particular behaviour (Croteau and Hoynes, 2000). Do violent movies make people use violence in their lives, for example? Croteau and Hoynes, however, have noted that as citizens we are partially reliant upon the news media for an informative and accurate account of what is happening in the world around us. In this respect, the news media form an important part of the political process. Citizens utilise information in the media to make informed judgements regarding the government of the day, and take appropriate political action. As highlighted in the introduction, education (and educational standards in particular), has become a highly politicised domain. The media forms a key source of information for the public where educational issues are concerned, but to what extent does the public internalise dominant claims of falling standards in the press?

One of the earliest theories about media effects suggested a direct and powerful influence upon the audience. Commentators wrote of a “hypodermic” or “silver bullet” model, with the media injecting a message straight into the “bloodstream” of the public. Such theories, however, were quickly undermined by the findings of empirical research. In a study of voting behaviour, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) argued that the media’s influence on the public was weak and short-lived. The underlying premise of this “minimal” effects model was that media messages acted to reinforce existing beliefs rather than to alter opinion. Some theories went as far to argue that interpersonal contact was more important than the media in changing beliefs, because it entailed a desire for social acceptance that is inherent in all human interaction. In the late 1960s, researchers increasingly paid attention to the “agenda-setting” role of the media. Bernard Cohen (1963: 13) famously stated that the news *“may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about”*. The emphasis of the agenda-setting approach was on the role journalists play in selecting and shaping the news. (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000)

Funkhouser (1973) examined three sources of data: (1) public opinion polls regarding the most important issues facing the United States at the time, (2) media coverage in the top three US weekly news magazines, and (3) statistical indicators measuring the “reality” of key issue areas. He found substantial correlation between public opinion and media coverage. Moreover, he found that neither public opinion nor media coverage correlated well with statistical indicators of the “real” world. For example, media coverage and public concern regarding the Vietnam War peaked *before* the greatest number of troops were sent to war. According to Croteau & Hoyes (2000), such findings suggest that media coverage of issues has greater impact on public opinion than on the issues’ objective prominence in the real world. In a later study, Brosius and Kepplinger (1990) coupled content analysis of German television news programs with weekly public opinion polls on the most important issues of the day. On some issues, they found that public concern either preceded media coverage, or that the two were correlated poorly. This finding points to a need for caution when assessing the media’s role in determining the public agenda. The perceptions of some individuals on certain issues may be more resistant to media influence than others (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000).

Studies that directly examine the media effect on public perceptions of examination standards in the UK are a rarity. A number of research studies, however, have looked at perceptions of either educational standards in general, or examination standards in particular. Hughes, Desforges and Holden (1994) explored the issue of parents’ satisfaction with educational

standards in their children's schools, arguing that they are often portrayed in the media as 'dissatisfied customers'. They found that the majority of parents were satisfied with the standards in their own children's schools, but felt that standards in schools generally were falling rather than rising or staying the same. The opinions of teachers at the same schools were also investigated. Teachers tended to agree with parents that standards at their own school were satisfactory, but unlike the parents only a small minority (1 in 22) thought that standards more generally were falling. Baker (2000:12) questions whether parents' views of standards were influenced by what they had read or seen in the media, or if they were trying to rationalise their school-choice decision. Similarly, he asks whether teachers possessed the professional knowledge to withstand misinformation in the media or if they were "*closing ranks to defend fellow professionals elsewhere*".

During 2001, MORI conducted two studies on behalf of Edexcel. The first examined parents' perceptions of GCSE and A-Level examinations. The study included questions on standards over time, and was conducted via structured telephone interviewing. Among the key findings were that 65 *per cent* of parents thought that GCSEs were getting harder or had stayed the same and 53 *per cent* thought that A-Levels were getting harder or had stayed the same. The increase in pass rate in GCSE and A-Level were attributed to students working harder by 41 *per cent* of parents and to improved teaching by another 28 *per cent*: only 18 *per cent* suggested that examinations were getting easier. Furthermore, there was a high degree of trust in examination boards, and a confidence that they took steps to ensure comparability. The second study was concerned with perceptions of the examination system. Relevant findings included the fact there was no clear consensus amongst parents about whether examination standards are higher or lower than those they sat when at school/college. Similarly parents do not have a common view about whether it is easier or harder to gain a given grade than it was ten years ago. Again levels of confidence in the examination system were high, and there was high degree of trust of examiners. There was, however, some concern amongst parents of students taking the Summer 2001 AS examinations that standards were falling.

More recently, QCA (2002a) commissioned a team from MORI/CDELL to conduct a survey into the perceptions of standards in public examinations. An explicit assumption of the research was that the credibility of public examination standards will not be secured through technical research alone, and that a direct look at how stakeholders form their views regarding the standard of public examinations is needed. The research comprised four complementary parts: a literature review; a series of 27 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the examination process (government, teaching unions etc); four focus groups with teachers; and a survey of the general public using the MORI Omnibus (sent to 1,778 adults in England and Wales). Some of the main interview findings were that virtually all key stakeholders agreed that changes in curriculum and examination syllabuses and assessment methods precluded comparisons between examination grades over medium to long periods of time. It was also consistently stated that there was a plethora of reasons why grade distributions should show improvement over time – better preparation for examinations, better assessment methods and so on. Furthermore, most people expressed concern over what they considered to be simplistic 'standards' stories in the media around the time of the publication of results. There was general support for the notion that more should be done to attract better informed media coverage.

Similar themes arose from the focus groups with teachers. They felt, for example, that it is hard to determine whether examinations are easier because "*no straight, like-with-like comparison can be made between, say O-Levels and GCSEs or A-Levels and the new style AS/A2-Level*" (MORI: 2001: 12). Interestingly, teachers tended to suspect that examination standards have

not been maintained over time. They cited increased difficulties in predicting grades and an increase in the proportion of students who achieve the highest grades (often coming as a shock to some teachers) as evidence for this. Teachers' concern over the maintenance of examination standards is compounded by mistrust in examination boards. Media reports or first-hand accounts from colleagues, who are examination markers, have served to undermine confidence in the examination boards. A handful of teachers thought the government may have manipulated the figures in order to meet their own targets for education. Whilst many teachers acknowledged that greater information is now available from examination boards – leading to greater transparency in the system – many called for further information.

The general public Omnibus findings indicated little consensus regarding whether examination standards have changed over time. The survey revealed variations in attitudes to current examination standards by age, social class, ethnicity, educational attainment and parental status. Despite uncertainty regarding whether there has been a change in examination standards, people felt that it is now *less* difficult to get the highest grades in examinations taken at age 16. The most frequently cited reason for it being *less* difficult to achieve the highest grades was that examinations are now easier. Coursework was also thought to make it easier to obtain higher grades. Schools/teachers and the media were typically found to influence people's views about examination standards. The research, however, identified a paradox in that people felt that the media influenced their opinions about examinations, but the majority of respondents expressed mistrust of the media. McNair (1998:39) has commented that:

“Audiences today are media literate, relatively suspicious and disbelieving and increasingly cynical. Informed scepticism can be assumed to be a common feature of the contemporary reception environment”.

He attributes contemporary audiences' scepticism of the media, in part, to the 'new journalism' movement. This movement came into prominence in the United States in the late 1960s, and set out to undermine the supposed objectivity of journalistic accounts of reality.

Research into public perceptions of educational/examination standards has revealed little consensus regarding whether standards are falling. Moreover, opinions regarding standards seem to vary by group and according to demographic characteristics. There is evidence, for example, that the perceptions of Teachers vary from those of key stakeholders in the examining process and the general public. Social location matters because it dictates the kind of interpretative framework individuals bring to the mass media (Croteau and Hoynes 2000). Indeed, Rowe (1993) has commented that:

“The news we see on television and read in the papers has no effect on us whatsoever. What we are affected by is not the news but our interpretation of the news”.

Research has increasingly shown that audiences actively use information presented to them in the media. Gamson (1992), for example, illustrated in his focus-group study how regular working people combine media-based information with popular wisdom and experimental knowledge to construct meaning. His study treated the media as a resource which people can use, to varying degrees, to help them make sense of current events. Similarly, Lenart (1994) argued that media information and interpersonal communication *“are complementary halves of the total information whole”*. Thus, one of the main factors that determine an individuals'

interpretation of examination news items may be the extent of their prior knowledge. This in turn is determined by the availability of alternative sources of information (McNair, 1998). The reticence of those in the education profession to engage in the media debate over standards (Mortimore and Mortimore, 1998; Warmington and Murphy, n.d; Baker, 2000), coupled with the lack of (visible) information published by awarding bodies regarding the examining process, dramatically reduces the information available to the public.

The Role of the Education Profession

“...education get(s) exactly the sort of media it deserves precisely because educators make so little effort to influence the message and have therefore abandoned the public...debate to the politicians and the polemicists”.

Baker (2000:3)

There seems to be a long-standing fatalism among British educationalists about the quality of news coverage educational issues receive. Baker (2000), a journalist and visiting professor, suggests reasons for the perceived retreat by educationalists from the public (as opposed to the professional) debate. He argues that their reluctance to engage with the popular press stems from a nervous recognition by educationalists that the news media does indeed construct, rather than simply ‘find’ stories. In addition, many educators perceive the task of satisfying both expert and non-expert audiences via comments in the media to be an impossible one. Either colleagues will be disappointed by what they regard as ‘sound-bite’ oversimplification or the interested ‘lay’ audience will find sophisticated technical accounts difficult to understand.

Newton (2005a) identifies media reports as the principal threat to public understanding of educational assessment – they help to construct and maintain a mythical image of assessment as a process which can and ought to be free from both measurement inaccuracy and human error. Moreover, Newton (2005a, 2005b) refutes the proposition that increased public understanding of educational measurement would undermine public confidence in the system:

“...not understanding measurement inaccuracy is a far greater threat than understanding it, since it will result in the system repeatedly being held to account for more than it can possibly deliver. As unrealistic expectations are unmet, so the system will appear to have failed; and this recurrent process will gradually erode public confidence.”

(Newton 2005b: 419)

For Newton (2005a), it is imperative that those responsible for educational assessment counteract potentially misleading images from media reports by developing strategies to enhance public and professional understanding of assessment error. He mentions four strategies by way of example. First, he advocates research into the reliability and validity of national tests and public examinations in the UK. Furthermore, resultant findings should be easy to communicate to users and stakeholders – traditional reliability coefficients do not fare well in this respect. Second, research findings could be synthesised in the form of defensibility arguments, written for a lay audience, and published on agency websites. Third, agencies could publish more general statements regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their assessments; addressing the kind of inferences that can and cannot be drawn from results. Newton (2005b) comments that such materials are becoming more common in the USA, as a

consequence of the No Child Left Behind Act. Finally, where possible, agency representatives when being interrogated by the media should avoid “*oversimplistic absolutism*” in the form of short, simple denials of error.

Greater transparency and openness regarding the examination process and examination results would equip the public with the necessary information to evaluate negative news reports. Indeed, it may even cause the publication of examination results to become a ‘non-issue’, as the nation’s media would find it increasingly difficult to sensationalise small shifts in the pattern of results. From the perspective of a UK awarding body, however, publishing information regarding internal procedures and the reliability of results may not be desirable. There is no guarantee that such information would be received positively – it could serve to incite the media and lead to further crises over education. Furthermore, if UK awarding bodies did not adopt similar policies regarding the availability of examination information, then those being proactive about transparency/openness may inadvertently jeopardise their market share. Presumably, centres would enter candidates with the awarding body with the most favourable ‘public image’.

Having said this, previous research into examination standards (QCA, 2002a) indicates widespread demand, from students, parents, and teachers alike, for the kind of information Newton (2005b) is proposing. Moreover, in a report of a panel of independent experts commissioned by the QCA (2002b) to “*review the adequacy of the quality assurance systems that are designed to maintain GCE A-level standards*”, it was advised that QCA more actively identify the benefits, processes and limitations of the examination system, and more aggressively communicate how the limitations should inform expectations of what the system can deliver. Thus, the panel seemed to advocate greater transparency and openness regarding the limits of the system, in order to encourage more realistic expectations at policy and public level.

One of the UK awarding bodies, Edexcel (2001), has produced literature specifically aimed at students. The booklet attempted to demystify the notion of ‘standards’, and stressed that the government monitors examination standards and that “*Edexcel is working to maintain standards over time*”. Interestingly, Edexcel commissioned a study of the impact of this booklet (Hill and King, 2001). This indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the booklet, and that most students and teachers found it to be informative, well presented, and beneficial to their understanding of examination processes. However, the study did not provide any insight into perceptions of the appropriateness of the examination process, and there was no analysis of reactions to specific content of the booklet, such as the section on standards. Therefore, whether the provision of such information influences perceptions of awarding bodies and the setting and maintenance of standards remains unknown, perhaps, pointing to an area for future research.

Practical strategies exist for dealing with the print and broadcast media (Manning, 2001; White et al, 1993). To those educationalists concerned about the negative news coverage educational issues receive year after year, Warmington and Murphy (n.d:12) challenge that:

“Complaints about poor coverage, or ill-informed media comment, take us nowhere really. There are undoubtedly lessons to be learned from other areas of public life, where interest groups have found better ways to get improved coverage for issues which concern them.”
(Warmington and Murphy, n.d: 12)

McNair (1998) observed that media output is increasingly the product of activity external to the journalists' immediate environment – communicative work which is purposely designed to shape news in ways favourable to the individual or organisation initiating it. He argues that such interactions are beneficial for all manner of organisations - pressure and lobby groups, business organisations, trade unions and political parties alike. When it comes to thinking about how to tackle the media, education is no different from other key areas of public life. Educators could learn from other high profile organisations e.g., Greenpeace, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), which actively seek to manage their public image via the press. Furthermore, recent research (Warmington and Murphy, 2002, 2004, 2005, n.d) into how the media constructs debates surrounding educational issues provides invaluable insights for those wishing to access and influence education news coverage.

Future Research

The dearth of literature into the presentation and construction of education news issues means that there is tremendous scope for future research. For example, Warmington and Murphy's (2003, 2004, 2005, n.d) content analysis of print and broadcast results coverage could be replicated in subsequent years to assess the longevity of 'news templates', and trace the construction of any new debates in the nation's press. Discursive analysis of headline and narrative content could also be conducted using smaller units of analysis: paragraphs for example rather than whole news items. An understanding of the way in which the media reports examination issues would prove invaluable to any awarding body. It would enable awarding bodies to develop suitable strategies for interacting with the press and, in turn, raise the profile of examination news coverage.

As well as quantitative research, there is scope for further qualitative research into key stakeholders' perceptions of examination standards, and how these are shaped by media reports. One issue which appears to be particularly lacking in research is if, and how, information regarding the operations of awarding bodies and standard setting (which seems to be in demand from students, parents, and teachers), might impact upon people's perceptions of standards. Would greater transparency and openness by those responsible for national testing help to diffuse media debates, or simply serve to undermine public confidence in the system. Furthermore, how best could such information be communicated to the general public?

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