‘Read all about it!’ UK news media coverage of A-Level results.

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Abstract:

News coverage of public examination results in the UK has escalated in recent years. The years 2002 and 2003, in particular, witnessed a bitter media debate over A-Level results. Yet, while educationalists often deride the quality of the annual exam debate, there has been minimal research into the specific ways in which exam news issues are constructed by news media. This paper discusses the critical findings of an inter-disciplinary study, conducted by education and media specialists, of print and broadcast news coverage of the publication of A-Level results in August 2002 and 2003. The paper focuses upon three particular elements: the distribution of different headline categories and themes; the structural, narrative and presentation templates in which A-Level news items were embedded and the discursive features that have characterised the dominant template for A-Level news coverage: the claim that exam standards are ‘falling’. The paper concludes by briefly considering some of the broader questions about the relationship between the education sector and news media in the UK, reflecting upon the ritualistic and polarised nature of coverage, the subtext of anxieties over the ‘massification’ of post-compulsory education and the readiness (or not) of educationalists to engage in a debate being played out for increasingly high stakes.

Introduction

‘...A-Level stories, and their subtext, are predictable. By the time you read this, the highest-ever proportion of good A-Level passes will have been recorded; ignorant commentators will have trumpeted that A-levels and GCSEs have been “dumbed down”; ministers will have piously responded that we should “celebrate the achievements” of our children.’

New Statesman, 18/8/03.

In the UK growing political and media interest in education standards has produced an environment in which public examination results generate ideologically and emotionally charged debate. The final fortnight of August, which sees the publication of A-Level examination results, has become one of the major diary items in the news media’s calendar. First introduced in the UK in the 1950s (and reformed in 2000 into a unitised, two part qualification), A-Levels remain a ‘gold standard’: the key post-16 academic qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland [1]. Notwithstanding recent
reforms aimed at diversifying post-16 qualifications and widening participation in post-compulsory education, A-Levels still provide the ‘standard entry’ route into undergraduate higher education. A-Level results are released each August, giving students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland grades in each subject for which they have entered. These grades are also aggregated so that comparisons can be made between the percentages of students acquiring each grade (say between subjects or schools) and can be used as a basis for comparisons with results achieved in previous years. During the traditionally news-dry summer season, A-Level exam results guarantee print and broadcast journalists a story of national relevance, in which large sections of the population have a direct stake, whether as students, teachers or parents. Moreover, in recent years coverage has broadened its focus beyond the performance of learners, schools and ministers to apply increasing scrutiny to the technicalities of exam board grading and monitoring and to offer quasi-sociological pronouncements upon the implications of mass post-compulsory education. This represents a significant change from the early years of A-Level, when there was very little attention paid to the annual release of results:

“It is perhaps ironical that the very success of public examinations in establishing their place as a normally dependable indicator of aspects of the educational achievement of individuals, has propelled them into another very different world, in which they are being used as the basis for judgements about systems, organisations and policies” (Murphy, 2003, p186)

Gradual increases in media reporting of the annual release of examination results culminated in unprecedented coverage in 2002. Complaints from certain schools about the grades awarded to some students created the context for a major national debate that generated headlines for several days, ultimately contributing to the resignations of the Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Sir William Stubbs, and the Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris. While less spectacular in its impacts, 2003’s reporting re-ignited concerns over exam quality, the permanence of the A-Level ‘gold standard’ and the subject choices made by A-Level students. The simultaneous progress of the Tomlinson Report, which has advised fundamental reform of the UK’s post-16 general qualifications system, arguably reinforced the media’s sense that the UK’s exam system was to be called to public account. This paper offers an analysis of the ways in which exam news issues were constructed and prioritised in 2003 (with some comparison to 2002), in order to provide a detailed insight into the features of a popular debate that represents a key interface between the education sector, its assessment bodies and the general public. As such, it builds upon the wider analysis of media and education issues developed by Warmington and Murphy (2004) and Warmington, Murphy and McCaig (2005).
Conceptualising exam news coverage

This paper is based upon the findings of an inter-disciplinary study (News Media Depiction of A-Level and GCSE Examination Results in 2003) conducted by a small team of education and media specialists at the University of Nottingham with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The research comprised a critical analysis of local and national news coverage of the publication of A-Level and GCSE examination results in August 2003. Its principal aim was to examine the ways in which exam news issues were constructed and prioritised, in particular relation to the presentational contexts of print and broadcast coverage. Its approach was to import critical concepts common in media study into the field of popular debates on education. This paper also refers to the team’s preceding pilot study of 2002’s exam coverage (Warmington and Murphy, 2003). The paper focuses upon three particular elements of the research. The first is the distribution of different headline categories and narrative themes in print and broadcast coverage. The second is the role of news templates in shaping the coverage of 2003’s A-Level exam results. News templates are defined here as the 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. Thirdly, through headline and content analysis, this paper identifies the discursive features that populated what became the dominant template for A-Level coverage in both 2002 and 2003: the claim that exams standards were ‘falling’. By focusing particularly on the custom and format of the ‘falling standards’ agenda, the authors suggest that there is a genuine structural basis to oft-voiced claims that exam coverage in the UK is predictable and ritualistic.

Cottle (1995, p.285) points to the importance of ‘contest’ and ‘opposition’ in the media’s construction of news narratives, arguing that one of most widely accepted and least questioned discursive templates in broadcast and print journalism is the idea that:

‘…important social issues and concerns are, by definition, constituted by the discursive engagement of contending positions…’

This is both an ideological and an aesthetic tendency but Cottle (1995) also attributes TV news journalism’s reliance on the organising principles of ‘contest’ to the structures of news production. In particular, considerations of cost have promoted increasing reliance on video/ studio link/ video formats (as has the populist desire to sustain audience interest by constructing news coverage out of brief interviewee statements and bites of information that can be readily packaged into a new report). The result has been to steer the public away from ‘the possibility of witnessing engaged
and elaborated positions of discursive and rhetorical struggle’, a tendency that Cottle (1995) also
detects increasingly in print formats.

In surveying education debates, Williams (1997) also emphasises the prevalence of polarised
discourse, the allure of which is structural and aesthetic, as much as it is ideological. Comparison of
Williams’ (1997) analysis with that of academics specialising in news media provides important
insight into the mediating relationship between news formats and ideological messaging. Williams
(1997) examines the ways in which ‘public, written texts’ rely upon polarising categories; this may be
equated with Cottle’s (1995) definition of contest between the voices of different stakeholders in TV
and tabloid news. Williams (1997: p.25), writing from an educationalist’s perspective, examines the
discursive shorthand via which positions in public debates are signalled:

‘...public debates are constructed around “icon words” or “condensation symbols” ...Such “icon”
words have become embedded in “polarising discourses”.’

The importance of ‘icon words’ in the production of public debate is, for Williams (1997, pp. 25-26)
twofold: firstly, they simplify debates and issues; secondly, and more importantly:

‘...by using one or two key words, the unacceptability of the opposite (viewpoint) ...is assumed.
The processes of categorization, of differentiation do not have to be spelled out in detail.
Meanings are constructed through explicit or, more often, implicit, contrast...’

Reliance upon ‘icon words’ in public debate indicates editorial behaviour (not merely upon the part
of news media professionals but by all voices). However, the notion of ‘icon terms’ also indicates
the mediating of ideology, since ideological expression is formatted into the shape of discursive
contest, the familiar grammar of media controversy. Williams (1997, p. 27) makes a number of
important points about the way in which icon terms operate: firstly, as formats that structure and
shorthand complex debate (basing them upon ‘polarised and simplistic dichotomies’) and, secondly,
in relation to how they ‘link with much wider educational and political discourses upon which they
draw and into which they feed.’ One structural cum ideological feature of icon terms is that they
interlink ‘discourses of derision and idealization’ (Williams, 1997: p.26; cf. Wallace, 1993),
legitimising and normalising preferred viewpoints and practices ‘by rendering their antitheses in
negative, unacceptable terms.’ Another feature of icon terms is that they ‘can allow for contradictory
policies and practices to be reconciled’ (Williams, 1997: p.27). The arch tone of the following quote
from the Financial Times offers a deprecating admission of the sleights of logic concealed by the
iconography of ‘falling standards’, as well a recognition of the durability of the ‘falling standards’
template.
This paper concentrates on the construction of ‘falling standards’ crisis narratives around exam pass rates in both print and broadcast settings. This does not imply that print and broadcast news operate in entirely similar ways, although, as Cottle (1995) notes, academics should be equally cautious about assuming archetypal distinctions between ‘tabloid’ and broadsheet’ or ‘print’ and ‘broadcast’ forms. For instance, the prominence of dramatic contest in broadcast news derives, in part, from the legal obligation that news broadcasters have to meet standards of impartiality (cf. BBC, 2003; ITC, 2003). In print settings, wherein party political allegiances are often explicitly declared, dramatic contest often fits more closely to the notion of a ‘discourse of derision’ (Ball, 1990; Kenway, 1990; cf. Wallace, 1993). However, while broadcast media are constrained from explicit editorialisation, their profession of impartiality also carries its own stylistic and aesthetic criteria. Its presentational styles are not only related to a concern to be seen as transcending party political partisanship, but also to what Fiske (1987) refers to as the concern to present broadcast coverage as referring to events ‘happening out there’ (that is, as ‘real’, ‘neutral’ and relying on minimal mediation). Even so, both print and broadcast media tend to present news as ‘self-selecting’; the criteria for deciding significance are not explicit (Schudson, 1991).

In terms of presentation format, what makes a headline? Print news gives readers a greater range of significance cues than television. Newspapers indicate emphasis and significance through cues such as length of story, accompanying illustrations, size of headline, page status and whether a story is run above the fold or below the fold. Arguably, print news gives readers a strong visual indication of significance. By contrast television or radio news, depend on chronology. The lead story on a news broadcast gives viewers a strong indication that the issue covered is important. Print stories tend to lead with the most ‘newsworthy’ details; in a television broadcasts visuals are essential to the story’s construction and may lead off with the most compelling photographs or video. While the methodology and coding employed in the News Media Depiction projects drew upon these distinctions, the focus of this paper is upon the cumulative construction of the A-Level controversy and its discursive presence within what Schudson (1991) calls the ‘cultural air’, wherein what constitutes a newsworthiness becomes ‘self-evident’, ‘commonsense’.

**Room for debate**

Given the space that education coverage occupies in broadcast and print media in the UK, there is a surprisingly modest body of academic research into the construction and prioritisation of education news issues (notable exceptions being Wallace, 1993, and Jeffs, 1999). There has been a proliferation of media coverage of education in the UK over recent decades:
‘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, and some local papers have a journalist with some claim to the nomenclature. The former have weekly education sections containing a mix of specialist news and general articles…’ (Jeffs, 1999, p.165)

Warmington, Murphy and McCaig (2005) suggest links between the intensification of coverage of exam results and New Labour’s promotion of a higher standards agenda as a political signal to aspirational parents that the state system was a safe place to school their children. Since 1994 New Labour’s education policies have endorsed school league tables based upon test results. The standards agenda was coupled with full support for the retention of the A-Level exam (recently reinforced by New Labour’s insistence that it will retain A-Levels, despite the recommendations of 2005’s Tomlinson Report, initiated in the wake of the controversy over exam results in 2002). This policy context inflated ‘consumer’ expectations from parents and students alike. Consistent rises in A-Level exam pass rates thus became a double-edged sword. The cycle of heightened achievement and expectations has fed feverish, often sensationalist, media reportage of A-Level results each August; this reached a peak in 2002-3, with marked consequences for both the government, the exam board regulator (QCA), and the exam boards that are responsible for administering and monitoring the A-Level exam system.

Baker (2000) has argued that, while educators frequently express frustration with what they regard as trivial coverage of education issues, they are prone to forfeit proper critical analysis for a lay-perception of media communications. The aim of the News Media Depiction study was to afford proper consideration of the news media as a key interface between the education sector, its assessment bodies and the public. Rather than examining the media’s coverage of 2003’s exam results simply as a process of top-down dissemination of ideological agendas, it drew from the efforts of media specialists such as Bruck (1989), Cottle (1993, 1995) and Gauntlett (2001), in order to analyse the role of news production and presentation in constructing the content and parameters of exam news items. This is not, of course, to deny the presence of totalising top-down agendas but, rather, to take account of the fact that:

‘…even explicit ideological statements must be organized and presented through media formats and... such formats... contribute to the shape, texture and emphasis of certain coverage.’


Definitions of the public space in which the news media operate are, of course, open to radical critique and to a variety of depictions, and it is not the aim of this paper to survey the range of
positions. However, McQuail (2000, pp. 157-8) usefully defines the news media as operating within a ‘notional “space” which provides a more or less autonomous and open arena or forum for debate.’ News media facilitate this process of dialogue, debate and contestation by providing a forum for public debate among competing interest groups and by ‘reconstituting private citizens as a public body in the form of public opinion’ (McQuail, 2000, p. 158). Such notions attempt to sharpen categories such as ‘public opinion’, ‘public thinking’ and ‘public perceptions’, by foregrounding the idea of society as being constituted by diverse, contesting social interests. Popular media debates, therefore, can be understood in terms of how these social differences and debates find public representation within the news media.

Liberal pluralist conceptions of news media as a democratic space need to be qualified and treated with caution. Curran (2000) summarises the notion of the news mass media as a forum for pluralist debate and the formation of informed public opinion. In this model news media are defined as combining the roles of public watchdog independent of state authority, consumer champion and information provider. Curran (2000) critiques these idealistic claims on a number of grounds. For instance, the independence of the media is complicated by the status of public service broadcasters (such as the BBC) but also by the role of private power, in the form of press ownership (a salient issue in the UK where press ownership has traditionally been concentrated in the hands of moguls overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Conservative party). Curran (2000) also queries the informational role and emphasises the representational function of news media, wherein entertainment, spectacle and myth-making are key media products. In addition, the consumer representation function is in conflict with the powerful influence of advertising on media. Jeffs (1999) emphasises the influence of advertising on news media (with particular reference to the ways in which the growth of weekly education supplements has generated substantial revenue for national newspapers from universities and other bodies) and the explicit political allegiances of the UK’s national press. Such critiques of the role of news media have dismissed media professionals’ claims of impartiality and depicted news media as a force that is integrated into political and economic elites, ‘with a few groups enjoying privileged access to the media, and so disproportionate influence over …selection and portrayal of newsworthy issues’ (Walllace, 1993, p.323).

However, the notion of news media as an ‘open space’ in which oppositional discourses compete does provide a useful counterweight to simplistic notions about the ‘hegemonic’ role of the news media in constructing popular debates. It synthesises pluralistic and radical accounts of the media by suggesting that media professionals enjoy ‘relative autonomy’ but, at the same time, acknowledges that social groups do not have equal access to news media and that a small number
of interest groups have a very high degree of influence over the news-making process. Thus while news media favours existing power structures, conflicts between state power, private power and media mean that news organs often act as ‘loose cannon’, shifting allegiances, stirring up controversy, publicising dissenting views and transforming policy issues into spectacle (cf. Wallace, 1993). In short, it is not the case that news media tell people what to think but they certainly impact on what people think about (cf. Miller and Philo, 1999). What is important is to acknowledge that the news media may indeed serve dominant social interests, while also recognising that these dominant ideologies remain contested in specific, localised contexts, an example of which is the processes and formats of news item production.

Methodology
The methodology of the News Media Depiction of A-Level and GCSE Results in 2003 study is detailed in Murphy and Warmington (2002). The ESRC-funded study was based upon an intensive period of data gathering, with A Level data being collected between 13th -17th August 2003. A total of 208 print items were collected, including coverage in each national daily newspaper, a small sample of local daily newspapers and plus the Times Educational Supplement and the Times Higher Educational Supplement. In addition, a number of weekly newspapers fell into the data collection period, thus allowing for the inclusion of a small number of items from specialist and ethnic minority press. Collection of 161 broadcast items (14th August) included all scheduled bulletins on each of the five terrestrial channels plus 6-8 hour samples of the satellite and cable channels that feature substantial news coverage (Sky, BBC 24, ITN 24). Radio data sampled broadcasts from BBC Radio 1, BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 and BBC Radio Nottingham. This data sample was used for all statistical analysis and was contextualised in the qualitative analysis by data derived from exam coverage collected over the preceding months. The A-Level sample of the pilot study in 2002 took a similar form over a slightly shorter period (14th -16th August 2002), as described in Warmington and Murphy (2003). Importantly, the documentary analysis was supplemented by a series of interviews with key informants, including national and local journalists, exam board officials and representatives of professional bodies. These offered ‘insider’ responses to the August coverage, which enhanced the interpretation of the discourse that lay beyond the quantitative data.

Data coding schedules categorised three layers of item description. Firstly, items were categorised according to a set of basic classification variables, including features such as source, length and headline type. Secondly, items were categorised according to presentational and discursive forms (cf. Bruck, 1989). The final layer of coding described the narrative content of each news item. The central unit of analysis was the whole news item (rather than analysis by paragraph or sentence, for
instance). Whole news items were categorised by principal headline and a range of presentation features. This generated an overview of the distribution of headline themes. News items were then analysed via narrative content maps, which described the frequency and tone of narrative elements found within each news item and each headline type.

**Overview of A-Level Data**

A total of 208 A-Level print items were recorded in the *News Media Depiction Project 2003: 72.7% appearing in the broadsheet or specialist education press and 27.3% appearing in the tabloids*. A total of 161 broadcast (TV and radio) items were recorded. Analysis suggested a similar set of narrative templates to those that framed the previous year’s coverage (Warmington and Murphy, 2003). The exam debate was dominated by contest over whether the A-Level pass rate of 95.4% (with 21.6% gaining ‘A’ grades) signified a decline in exam standards and the value of the A-Level qualification. The focus of reporting replicated 2002’s concern with ‘falling standards’ and once again involved the same equating of consistently rising pass rates with lowering of A-Level standards that has permeated the past decade’s exam news debate (Shannon, 2002). This was despite the fact that in 2003 the 1.1 percentage point rise over the previous year’s pass rate was less marked than 2002’s 4.5 percentage point rise [2].

**Table I. Major print headline categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline category</th>
<th>2003 No. of items (%)</th>
<th>2002 No. of items (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Falling Standards</strong></td>
<td>82/ n208 (39.4%)</td>
<td>24/ n57 (42.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Celebration</strong></td>
<td>43/ n208 (20.7%)</td>
<td>9/ n57 (15.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student advice</strong></td>
<td>21/ n208 (10.1%)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>‘Spence’ stories</strong></td>
<td>15/ n208 (7.2%)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Record Pass Rates</strong></td>
<td>10/ n208 (4.8%)</td>
<td>11/ n57 (19.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender gap</strong></td>
<td>6/ n208 (2.9%)</td>
<td>3/ n57 (5.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exam Boards</strong></td>
<td>4/ n208 (1.9%)</td>
<td>2/ n57 (3.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest headline category referred to the issue of ‘falling standards’. This encompassed headlines suggesting that it was now easier to obtain A-Level pass grades, items referring to declining curriculum standards, headlines calling for reform of the A-Level system and one of 2003’s key themes: the claim that pass rates were rising because students gravitated towards supposedly less demanding subject options (which, in itself, accounted for 10.6% of total items). The category
also included headlines that incorporated refutations of the falling standard thesis (9.1% of total items) because even though they focused upon counter-arguments, such headlines still operated within the discursive boundaries of the falling standards debate. Within this category, there were gradations of distance between the falling standards thesis and the editorial line of the paper. Nevertheless, in each case an editorial decision had been made to prioritise ‘falling standards’ as the headline condensation symbol: the term Williams (1997) draws from Edelman (1964) to describe words used as shorthand for broad debates and which simultaneously signify and polarise particular discourses.

Of other print headlines, around one-fifth were celebratory: referring to the successes of individual students or particular schools or welcoming the overall pass rate. Other prominent headlines included those offering students advice on HE admissions, clearing and retakes and those that the research team termed ‘Spence’ stories, in reference to Laura Spence, a high achieving student who in 2000 was famously turned down for a place at Magdalene College, Oxford. The case of the straight-A state school student rejected by Oxbridge has itself become a staple of exam results coverage, 2003’s particular emblem being Candice Clarke, who was turned down by Cambridge, despite having achieved five ‘A’ grades.

Table II. Major broadcast headline categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline category</th>
<th>2003 No. of items (%)</th>
<th>2002 No. of items (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Falling Standards</td>
<td>58/ n161 (36%)</td>
<td>22/ n89 (24.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record Pass Rates</td>
<td>39/ n161 (24.2%)</td>
<td>30/ n89 (33.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results published</td>
<td>20/ n161 (12.4%)</td>
<td>7/ n89 (7.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration</td>
<td>18/ n161 (11.2%)</td>
<td>5/ n89 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TV and radio coverage relied upon a smaller range of headline types (Table II). Most lengthy items offered catch-all summaries, incorporating pass rate statistics alongside overviews of the debates around exam standards and, often, video location footage of students collecting their results. Consequently, there were higher frequencies of major issues in broadcast items (Table III). Since broadcast media are required to adhere to stricter divisions between ‘news’ and ‘editorialising’ (BBC, 2003; ITC, 2003), ‘record pass rates’ served as a convenient, relatively neutral headline, accounting for a third of broadcast headlines. Nevertheless, almost a quarter of items were prefaced by headlines flagging up the debate over falling standards, although these were usually phrased with greater editorial distance than their print equivalents, often in interrogative form (‘A-Level results are up again but are students choosing easier subjects?’ Radio Nottingham, 14/8/03)
or else by naming A-Level critics (‘Bosses organisation the Institute of Directors has joined the row over whether A-Levels are too easy’, BBC 24, 14/8/03).

Table III. Frequency of exam news issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam news issues</th>
<th>Print No. of items (%)</th>
<th>Broadcast No. of items (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ experiences</td>
<td>99/ n208 (47.6%)</td>
<td>104/ n161 (64.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass rates</td>
<td>83/ n208 (39.9%)</td>
<td>124/ n161 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE entry</td>
<td>77/ n208 (37%)</td>
<td>36/ n161 (22.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam standards</td>
<td>56/ n208 (26.9%)</td>
<td>98/ n161 (60.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard/ soft subjects</td>
<td>53/ n208 (25.5%)</td>
<td>61/ n161 (37.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curric/ exam reform</td>
<td>44/ n208 (21.2%)</td>
<td>23/ n161 (14.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam boards</td>
<td>21/ n208 (10.1%)</td>
<td>58/ n161 (36%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As explained in the methodology section, data were categorised according to discrete headline type. However, narrative content maps inevitably overlapped, in that the main narrative texts of articles which fell into different headline categories often shared common issues, albeit in varying proportions and from diverging perspectives. For example, in headlines that emphasised ‘record pass rates’, the articles concerned ranged from the primarily celebratory to those which used record pass rates as a proxy for ‘falling’ A-Level standards. It is useful, therefore, to note the frequency with which salient issues appeared across headline types (Table III). In terms of narrative content the most commonly featured issues in print and broadcast items were:

- **students’ experiences** (including experiences of studying and exams, experiences of awaiting and receiving results, of HE admissions, examples of exceptional achievement and other general ‘human interest’ items)
- **pass rates** (including reporting of statistics, comments on the record pass rate, on the increase in A grades and other trends)
- **HE entry** (including admissions trends and statistics, comments on A-Level’s value as a predictor of performance in HE, examples of exceptional achievement and other ‘human interest’ items, advice on admissions and clearing)
- **exam standards** (including debates over the significance of this year’s pass rates, claims about standards over time and across exam systems, comments about the impacts of annual criticism of standards)
• **hard/soft subjects** (including variants on the debate over comparability of standards across subject areas, statistics showing pass rates across subject areas, students’ comments on their personal experiences of particular subjects)

• **exam reform** (including general debates over the need for exam/syllabus reform, reorganisation of the QCA, comments on the impacts of government targets, discussion of ‘exam overload’)

• **exam boards** (comments by the exam boards on this year’s statistics, reassurances by ministers and exam boards of the rigorousness of this year’s grading and administration processes, comments upon the grading and administration practices of the exam boards).

Content analysis was also used to identify the range of voices incorporated into news items (Table IV). Of the total 208 print items, 146 (70.2%) incorporated ‘outside’ voices (i.e. voices other than the editorial voice that of the journalist) via direct or indirect quotations. Of the total 161 broadcast items, 126 (78.3%) incorporated actors’ comments, either via direct participation or via quotation. The most commonly presented voices were those of students, teachers, teaching/professional bodies, HE staff, government ministers and educational ‘experts’. Again the prominence of student voices reflected the dramatic value of human interest coverage and autobiographical comment, particularly in broadcast media. The presence of teaching/professional bodies is also noteworthy since the most commonly quoted professional body in 2003 was the Secondary Heads Association, in whose suggestion that the pass rate was powered by a drift away from ‘hard’ or ‘traditional’ subjects (typified as maths and foreign languages) towards ‘new’ or ‘soft’ subjects (typified by psychology and media studies) the news media found particular ‘issue’ value.

**Table IV. Participant voices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant voice</th>
<th>Print No. items (%)</th>
<th>Broadcast No. items (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>65/ n208 (31.3%)</td>
<td>63/ n161 (39.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (individual)</td>
<td>42/ n208 (20.2%)</td>
<td>41/ n161 (25.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching bodies</td>
<td>33/ n208 (15.9%)</td>
<td>31/ n161 (19.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE staff</td>
<td>34/ n208 (16.3%)</td>
<td>10/ n161 (6.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>33/ n208 (15.9%)</td>
<td>38/ n161 (23.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Expert’ commentators</td>
<td>24/ n208 (11.5%)</td>
<td>10/ n161 (6.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>19/ n208 (9.1%)</td>
<td>10/ n161 (6.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCAS/admissions</td>
<td>16/ n208 (7.7%)</td>
<td>4/ n161 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam boards</td>
<td>11/ n208 (5.3%)</td>
<td>8/ n161 (5%)</td>
</tr>
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Shannon (2002) has traced the growth in the news media of claims about declining standards in exams over time since the early 1990’s. By 2002 the ‘falling standards’ template and its related icons were already staples of results coverage. In addition, reporting of August 2002’s results followed a year in which public examinations and the awarding bodies had already received more than their usual share of media coverage. In the previous year the Edexcel exam board had attracted a good deal of attention through news stories about errors in examination papers and other administrative failures; in 2000 the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) had faced criticism over its management of the Higher Still, the equivalent of England, Wales and Northern Ireland’s A-Level (McCaig, 2003). In the resulting climate the meta-narrative of ‘falling standards’ became the organising principle via which critical reporting of assessment, curriculum content, learners’ attainments, administration and the predictive value of A-Levels in HE and employment could all be bound together. ‘Falling standards’ print headlines, included banners such as:

- Another rise in passes and top grades – soon it will become the examination that no student ever fails’ (Times, 14/8/03).
- ‘On a joyous day, dissenting note from an ex-examiner: We’re all deluding ourselves’ (Daily Mail, 15/8/03).
- ‘A-Levels full of suspicion’ (Daily Star, 14/8/03).
- ‘No repeat of last year’s marking fiasco – but debate on standards rumbles on’ (Nottingham Evening Post, 14/8/03).
- ‘A-Levels will be a success when more pupils fail’ (Sunday Times, 17/8/03).

Such headlines drew directly upon the same templates that characterised 2002’s lead stories:

- ‘What’s the point of an exam you can’t fail - fury as 94% pass A-Levels’ (Sun, 15/8/02).
- ‘Turn the clock back for exam grading’ (Daily Mail, 16/8/02).
- ‘Paper chase: the consequences of extravagant A-Level awards’ (Times, 15/8/02).

In turn, 2003’s falling standards thesis was contested in a number of headlines. Headlines of this kind were categorised as ‘refuting falling standards’ but it should be born in mind that these ‘refuting’ headlines still operated within the discursive boundaries of the falling standards debate, signalled by condensation symbols that paralleled ‘negative’ headlines.

- ‘Where is the proof of a fall in standards? (Guardian, 15/8/03).
- ‘We get better results because we work harder’ (Independent, 14/8/03).
‘A-Levels may have changed, but that doesn’t mean they are any less valuable’ (Independent, 14/8/03).

However, 2003’s reporting emphasised that, while news templates imply re-inscription of myth, in the sense described by Wallace (1993), templated repetition is also tempered by the need for ‘difference’: that is for the kind of novel angle capable of re-engaging audience interest. In 2002 ‘falling standards’ items presented two main types of claim: that the high pass rate indicated that exams were ‘getting easier’ or that grading standards were ‘falling’ and, secondly, headlines that called for reform to the exam system (Warmington and Murphy, 2003). To these, 2003’s reporting added a third, widely aired variant: the claim that this year’s rise in pass rates (from 94.3% to 95.4%) was fuelled by a trend for students to opt for ‘easier’ subjects (also termed ‘soft’ or ‘less traditional’ subjects) at the expense of ‘harder’, ‘traditional’ options. The ‘hard/soft’ claim was notable for its prominence (appearing in a quarter of print narratives), its uniform elements (in almost every case media studies and psychology were used to exemplify ‘soft subjects’, sometimes supplemented by law and business studies) and for its sudden promotion to major headline status:

- ‘95% passes in ‘easy’ subjects (Daily Express, 14/8/03).
- ‘Students choose easier A-Level options’ (Financial Times, 14/8/03).
- ‘Heads hit out at easy courses as A-Level passes rise again’ (Guardian, 14/8/03).
- ‘Psychology, law and media studies: the “scandalous” routes to A-grade success’ (Independent, 14/8/03).
- ‘Critics of psychology exam are challenged over “soft option” claim’ (Independent, 15/8/03).

‘Hard/soft’ headlines were clearly a variant of ‘falling standards’ types. Firstly, in depicting the supposed tendency for students to opt for subjects such as media and psychology as a new trend, a decline in standards over time was implied (these ‘easier’ subjects were often described as ‘new’ or ‘non-traditional’ subjects). Secondly, the purported lack of comparability between, say, maths or German and psychology or business studies suggested a lower standard of syllabus content in the latter, and consequently also indicated the erosion of a single A-Level gold standard (‘We do still have to address the issue of equal standards for all A-Level subjects’, Guardian, 26/8/03).

In 2002 a number of items had contained discussion of the fall in maths and foreign language entries but these tended to rely upon implicit, rather than explicit, contrast with supposed ‘soft’ subjects. An exception was the TES headline, 9/8/02: ‘Pupils shun maths for “softer” subjects’. Several headlines in 2002 also concerned themselves with students’ subject choices post AS-Level, claiming that students were using AS a testing ground, dropping less attractive subjects after their AS results and tailoring their A2 choices to their strengths. However, these articles were divided as
to whether this trend represented an encouraging example of informed decision-making by AS students (‘Smart students play to their strengths’, TES, 16/8/02) or whether it represented a cynical means of racking up UCAS points and avoiding a broad, challenging A-Level portfolio (‘Pass rate soars as pupils play the system’, Daily Telegraph, 15/8/02).

One identifiable source of 2003’s ‘hard/ soft’ debate was the Secondary Heads Association (SHA), whose spokesperson, John Dunford was quoted repeatedly, directly or indirectly, expressing concern over a drift away from maths and foreign languages towards ‘newer’ A-Level subjects, such as psychology and media studies (the contrast often being presented as a dichotomy between subjects that were of greater or lesser value to the economy). The Joint Council for General Qualifications (JCGQ) also drew attention to the 21.2% rise in entries for A-Level Psychology between 2002 and 2003. The JCGQ described this rise as representing ‘clear evidence that students were making informed choices about their A-Level courses on the basis of their AS results’ (JCGQ, 2003). Among articles that reflected upon the sudden prominence of the ‘hard/ soft’ opposition, The Observer (17/8/03) commented:

‘In this annual melodrama, only the villains vary. Sometimes a rogue official or dodgy exam board is singled out. This year, the canker of the system is the psychology A-Level…”

The TES (15/8/03) identified the academic root of the SHA’s position, depicting the ‘hard/ soft’ debate as an example of the popularisation of an issue once principally of interest to academic specialists:

‘The claim that students are avoiding “difficult” subjects, such as chemistry, French and German and choosing “softer” options, such as psychology …is not a new issue, of course, Professor Carol Fitz-Gibbon of Durham University, drew attention to the differing levels of A-Level subjects back in the mid-1990’s…”

The contrast between the value of a maths or physics A-Level in comparison with a media or business studies qualification shorthanded a series of broader ideological oppositions. They served, for instance, to express concerns about the maintenance of A-Level standards over time, by contrasting a ‘traditional’ gold standard academic curriculum with a ‘populist’ modernised curriculum that had absorbed vocationalism, process-orientated knowledge and accessibility. In turn, therefore, they also signalled oppositions between an elite post-compulsory system and a mass system, and between the function of exams as a means of identifying an academic elite, in contrast with exams functioning as a means of recording achievement (‘For their success to mean anything, others must fail… exams which are not divisive achieve nothing’, Sunday Telegraph, 17/8/03). In addition, the motives ascribed to students in choosing ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ subjects (in relation to testing
out subjects at AS Level and racking up UCAS points) abbreviated anxieties about learners operating as consumers. Tellingly, while several print and broadcast options pointed out that in subjects such as maths, the physical sciences and foreign languages there were, in fact, higher numbers of ‘A’ grades than in media, psychology or business, ‘soft’ subjects were implicitly equated with grade inflation and with warnings that A Level would ‘soon …become the examination that no student ever fails’ (Times 14/8/03). The ‘hard/soft’ divide offered an archetype of the discourse of derision.

The arch tone of the following quote from the Financial Times offers a deprecating admission of the sleights of logic concealed by the iconography of ‘falling standards’, as well a recognition of the durability of the ‘falling standards’ template.

‘Terrible news from north and south of the border: our education system is falling apart. In Scotland, this is demonstrated by a slump in the pass rate …in England and Wales, it is an increase in the A-Level pass rate which leads to the same conclusion.’ Financial Times 15/08/03.

A-Level coverage in both 2002 and 2003 was dominated by the ‘falling standards’ template yet the exact meaning of ‘standards’ in relation to examinations (or to education more generally) was rarely spelled out. Similarly, while the motif of ‘falling standards’ certainly related to some conception of comparability of A-Level standards, its exact significance shifted (often within the same newspaper and sometimes even within the same article) between comparability across time (as in reference to a perceived ‘gold standard’ A-Level system supposedly present in a past age); comparability across subjects areas (‘hard’ and ‘soft’ subjects); comparability across systems (in which A-Levels were contrasted with vocational qualifications or with the International Baccalaureate system), as well as comparability between the AS and A2 stages.

**Broadcast items: templates, contest and icons**

Analysis of broadcast A-Level coverage also highlighted the centrality of contest and opposition as the organising principles via which news debate was structured. However, it should be stressed that contest in this context was itself mediated by the need to be seen to adhere to broadcasting guidelines on impartiality (BBC, 1991, 2003; ITC, 2003). Over a third of broadcast items (33.7%) led with ‘record pass rate’ headlines. The narrative content of these items tended then to present reflections upon of the possible significance of the 95.4% pass rate. In almost every instance this was reduced to a binary opposition that took its momentum from, on the one hand, claims about ‘falling standards’ and, on the other, refutation of the ‘falling standards’ thesis. As with print
coverage the ‘hard/ soft’ debate was incorporated as a variation or proxy of the ‘falling standards
debate’. This discursive opposition was given narrative shape via ‘bites’ of a range of stakeholders’
comments, largely incorporated via brief video inserts. Headlines that emphasised the ‘record pass
rate’ appeared in four slight variants. Firstly, there were those voiced in an ostensibly neutral style
(‘A record number A-Level passes again’, ITV, 14/8/03). Secondly, there were headlines that, while
highlighting the pass rate, implied sympathy with students (‘It’s been another record-breaking year
for half a million teenagers who received their results today, Sky News, 14/8/03’). Thirdly, there
were pass rate headlines that implicitly drew attention to the fact that A-Level pass rates have, in
percentage terms, continued to rise over recent years (‘A-Level results are out in England and
Wales and – surprise, surprise – for the twenty-first year in a row the results are better than ever’,
BBC3, 14/8/03). Finally, there were pass rate headlines that explicitly linked the record pass rate to
the polarised debate over exam standards (‘This year’s A-Levels are the best ever – leading to
claims that exams are too easy’, BBC 24, 14/8/03).

Broadcast headlines that dealt with ‘falling standards’ and the ‘hard/ soft’ divide per se implied
varying degrees of distance from their headline statements, attributing doubts over the value and
validity of results to ‘critics’ or referring, with a degree of self-reflection, to the ‘annual wave of
criticism’:

• ‘More on this year’s A-Level results. It’s another bumper year, supposedly driven by pupils
steering away from traditional subjects…’; ITV 24, 10.31am, 14/8/03.
• ‘“Exams are too easy?” It’s like a red rag to a bull…’; BBC24, 1.17pm.
• ‘Record results but employers criticise “meaningless” A-Levels’, ITV, 12.30pm, 14/8/03.
• ‘Another year of record results. Are A-Levels really getting easier?’, BBC1, 1pm, 14/8/03.
• ‘A-Levels: critics say it’s now virtually impossible to fail but how do students feel about annual
claims of dumbing down?’; Channel 4, 7.25pm.

While broadcast media are constrained from explicit editorialisation (BBC, 1991, 2003; ITC, 2003),
their profession of impartiality also carries its own stylistic and aesthetic criteria. Its presentational
styles are not only related to a concern to be seen as transcending party political partisanship, but
also to what Cottle (1993, 1995) refers to as the concern to present broadcast coverage as referring
to events ‘happening out there’. The announcement of A-Level results naturally provides ample
opportunity for dramatic location footage. In addition, as with print coverage, the presence of
‘celebratory’ items should not be ignored. In addition to forming a substantial proportion of
broadcast headlines (11.2%), the incorporation of ‘celebratory’ footage into many items made for a
greater prominence than the headline proportion indicates. Needless to say, the moment at which students actually collect their results and open their envelopes constitutes a dramatic gift to broadcasters and a device with which to engage audience commitment and interest. Exceptional achievement on the basis of age or adversity also provided a ready dramatic opportunity, just as it did in print coverage, recalling Cottle’s (1995) suggestion that the populist ambitions of TV and (tabloid) press may not be as distinct as is often assumed.

Conclusion

In 2002 and 2003 the debate over A-Level exam results was reinforced as an element of the UK’s ‘cultural air’. The news media breathed in deeply. A-Levels were underlined as a newsworthy topic; the contest and opposition in which the debate was framed carried sufficient authority to impact momentarily upon the credibility of government and exam boards. The ready icons of ‘falling standards’, ‘hard and soft subjects’, ‘record pass rates’ and ‘grade inflation’ arguably set the A-Level debate in ritualistic terms. Photographs of ecstatic students (usually female and hugging) were used as a token gesture towards the celebratory function of A-Level results days. Once the congratulations were out of the way, the analysis generally turned fairly quickly to a critique - or a performance of critique - of the worth of the grades obtained. The contest/ opposition formula ostensibly signifies ‘democratic’ debate, albeit at a low political and cultural cost, since it is a convenient, undemanding format, largely unaffected by accounts of aggregated results, which are extremely difficult to interpret— especially given their provisional nature and the unpredictable differences in entry patterns and other demographic features within the population (Murphy et al, 1996; Murphy, 1998). First, wheel out a popular critic of examination/ educational standards. Then, put them up against an establishment figure, such as an education minister or a representative of an examination awarding body. From one side comes the full frontal attack on seemingly worthless qualifications, and like a flash the attack is countered by gold standard/best in the world/excellent teaching arguments. This has excellent spectacle value: a good lively debate between highly educated people with seemingly polarised views about a topic of huge national significance. No matter how heated the debate, the presentation form is paradoxically consensual, in that it suggests national concern over an ‘important’ issue and implies a ‘middle way’ between two ‘extremes’. The underlying messages are that ‘we’, as a society are deeply invested in education; systems are accountable, penetrating questions can be asked freely and publicly but, ultimately a smooth-running, orderly and harmonious social life will prevail (cf. Fiske, 1987).

Yet, at the same time, the different interests around A-Levels have arguably become so contradictory that the mix of celebration and antagonism might be read as an attempt to ‘resolve’
wider anxieties about increasing level of participation in post-compulsory and especially higher education. Since Collins (1979) christened ‘the credential society’ and famously speculated about the consequences of ‘credential inflation’ it has become commonplace for academic critiques of the shifting social significance of educational qualifications and the differentiation between the credential haves and have-nots. The New Labour government’s target for participation in higher education (50 per cent of 18-30 year olds by 2010) has underlined the proliferation and consumption of qualifications as central to its social policy. However, as a result of this semi-planned expansion, a key contradiction has been exposed. To stimulate participation in post-compulsory education, the credibility and desirability of qualifications must be driven up but, in extending credentialisation, the value of qualifications as a commodity risks being driven down by qualification ‘inflation’, hence the Jekyll and Hyde nature of the exam results news coverage, wherein stories celebrating students’ A-Level triumphs run side by side with columns condemning ‘exams you can’t fail’. In this setting it is little wonder that the news media, regardless of the micro-loyalties of party politics, are caught between conflicting drives and audience appeals. On the one hand, the aim of increasing participation and extending the ownership of A-Level credentials plays well, representing as it does an inclusive social policy aspiration. On the other hand, the prospect of wider distribution of credentials raises questions about how the costs of the widening participation project will be spread: not only in economic terms (with regard to fees, taxation and central funding) but also in relation to the potentially diminished cultural capital of qualifications. Hoisted by these contradictions, the news media’s annual cries have become both an expression of and a distraction from a complex social and educational debate.

Alongside all of this is a growing recognition that examination results are not, and never will be, a highly robust and accurate source of educational data (Murphy, 2004; Newton, 2005). The fallibilities of both individual and aggregated examination grades continue and provide a space within which media commentators can speculate about possible conclusions that might be drawn from them. This is a pattern that can be seen in many countries around the world, where anxieties about education systems are projected upon test results and any other forms of educational data that might indicate some kind of outcome measure for students, teachers, schools or even national systems (Black, 1998; Newton, 2005). It is perhaps ironical that the drive for greater accountability in education systems seems to have led to a much greater emphasis on tests and examinations, which appear often to generate data that cannot adequately answer the questions that people who desire greater accountability want to be answered.
NOTES

[1] The reform of A-Levels in 2000 reorganised the qualification into two parts: the AS and the A2. The Advanced Subsidiary (AS) is a stand alone qualification, valued as half a full A-Level. The more demanding A2 is the second half of the qualification; those achieving A2 are awarded the full A-Level.

[2] In 2001 the 89.8% pass rate represented 672,500 /n748, 886. Male passes equalled 310,780/n 346,080 (89.8%) and female passes equalled 365,327 /n 402,786 (90.7%). By contrast, in 2002 the 94.3% pass rate for A2 represented 661,401 /n 701, 380. Male passes equalled 301,348/ n324, 030 (93%) and female passes equalled 360,165/ n 377, 530 (95.4%). In 2003 the A2 pass rate was 95.4% (716,012/ n750,537). Female passes totalled 390,280/ n404,855 (96.4%); male passes totalled 325,978 / n345,682 (94.3%).

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