

Discursive Politics of Studentship: Representation of Higher Education Students in the News Media

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The number of higher education students (HE) has significantly grown in recent decades, yet the extent to which understandings of ‘the student’ are shared nationally and globally is not clear. Existing scholarship on this topic centres on social actors within HE, but matters related to students are not confined to its circles alone – they are also discussed in mainstream media. This study explores how students are constructed in the news media within and across six European states: Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. The paper argues that the discursive politics of studentship in the media discourse is constituted by the contingent and contradictory representation of what it means to be a student. These negotiations shape what is considered as legitimate studentship and can have implications for public perception of students within and beyond HE, as well as for students’ everyday lives as they navigate this discursive space.

Full paper

Over the past decades, higher education (HE) has undergone significant changes, driven by massification, globalisation, and marketisation. These trends have democratised access to HE, fostering diversity but also raising concerns about inequalities. The role HE in the ‘knowledge economy’ has intensified, leading to market-based reforms and increased importance within transnational agendas. Yet, within these developments, the extent to which understandings of ‘the student’ are shared nationally and globally as well as among different social actors is not clear. Existing scholarship on HE students centres on social actors within HE, but matters related to students are not confined to its circles alone – they are also discussed in mainstream media. Nevertheless, HE students in the news media remains an under-researched area, despite the growing importance of HE in national and global policy making and its increasing value and interest as a topic in the news media. For example, studies on the mediatisation of HE policy highlight media’s role in shaping educational narratives (e.g., Baroutsis & Lingard, 2023). Furthermore, media coverage remains important source of information through which matters related to education, including understandings of students, become known to the public (Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003). Media also retains discursive power, playing a significant role in constructing legitimate subjectivities and ideals of social agency (Ridell, 2008). Consequently, media

serve as influential social actors in constructing ideas about what it means to be a student, highlighting the significance of investigating the portrayals of students in the news media.

This paper explores constructions of HE students in the news media across six European countries: Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Spain. Theoretically, the paper is inspired by discourse theoretical approach, which posits that discourse is not limited to language or texts alone, but encompasses a broader understanding of social practices, ideologies, and power dynamics (Howarth, 2005). In this approach, news discourses are considered as a complex combination of norms, ideas and practices in which meanings are articulated and hegemonic discourses are (re)produced, contested and resisted (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). The data this paper draws on was collected as part of a larger project involving a textual analysis of 1159 news articles published between 2014 and 2016 in 12 different tabloid or broadsheet national newspapers. Originally, two analytical methods were employed: qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. This paper focuses on the findings from the latter, making visible some of the discursive processes involved in media representation of HE students.

The paper argues that what it means to be a student is represented in the news media in contingent and, at times, contradictory ways, constituted through political and ideological negotiations. The paper demonstrates this by analysing four contradictory representations of students. First, the portrayal of students as entitled and demanding a quality education, while simultaneously depicting them as incompetent or lacking appreciation of academic traditions and a commitment to learning. The second contradiction is the expectation of students being efficient and making the 'right' choices, while depicting them as stressed and emphasising the importance of self-care. Thirdly, students are also constructed as over-sensitive and immature, and simultaneously threatening academic traditions and in possession of extensive amount of political power. The fourth contradiction in the news discourse lies in its emphasis on inequalities among the student population, while paradoxically, often focusing on individual students rather than unpacking the structural factors that reproduce systemic inequalities.

These articulated negotiations and contradictions can be understood as a discursive politics of studentship in action, determining who is deemed a legitimate student, which activities are considered acceptable, and what expectations and values are placed on current and future students. Furthermore, this contingent and contradictory representation of studentship in the news media can have implications for the public perception of students within and beyond HE, as well as for students' everyday lives as they navigate this discursive space. This paper effectively demonstrates the significance of media analyses within the realm of HE scholarship by providing valuable insights into the contribution of news media in constructing and disseminating representations of students, thereby enriching our understandings of the studentship in the contemporary society.

References

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