



## Whose Opinions Count in Educational Policymaking?

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The success of some advocacy organizations in advancing their preferred policies despite questionable evidence of the effectiveness of these policies raises questions about what contributes to successful policy promotion. We hypothesize that some education-focused organizations are advancing their agendas by engaging media, with individuals who may not possess traditionally defined educational expertise. Using two distinct expert lists, we examined relationships between measures of expertise and educational impact. We found non-significant positive relationships between these measures with a list of experts compiled by a conservative think tank, while a second list from a university-based center showed a significant positive relationship. We conclude that media impact is at best loosely coupled to expertise. This issue should be explored in greater depth because deleterious outcomes are more likely if individuals are more successful in shaping policy discussion based on criteria outside of expertise.

*Keywords:* agenda setting, decision making, educational policy, expertise, information dissemination, political influences, politics

In recent years, American public education has been experiencing a period of notable pressure to adopt far-reaching reforms; buttressed by a familiar narrative of public school failure, specific and significant reforms have been advanced as necessary to improve student learning (Ravitch, 2010; Brill, 2011). For example, Race to the Top, a four-plus billion dollar federal competition sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, has been designed to advance major, specific policies across the states (“Race to the Top Fund”, 2012). A significant concern centers on the degree to which reforms are advanced on the basis of evidence versus, for instance, popularly held “common sense” notions, or viewpoints that are assumed to be true in elite policy circles. In this paper, we examine whose facts and opinions are most frequently cited in media accounts and by policymakers, and how this relates to these individuals’ backgrounds and actual educational expertise. We hypothesize that many education-focused organizations in the U.S. are successfully advancing their agendas by using individual

actors who may have more acumen in terms of media engagement than in terms of research expertise.

In the current environment of educational reform, we have seen the rise of many entities characterized by varying levels of expertise or reliance upon research. Debray-Pelot, Lubienski, and Scott (2007) provide depth and historical context in their analysis of the U.S. institutional landscape, focused upon interest group politics around vouchers and other forms of school choice. In so doing, they present compelling evidence that a confluence of factors have given rise to an increasing of interest groups in terms of numbers and activities, and an increased complexity of interest group politics, including the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) and the landmark 2002 U.S. Supreme court ruling on the constitutionality of the Cleveland voucher program (Debray-Pelot et al., 2007). Still, subsequent local, state, and national political events underscore that issues surrounding school choice remain hotly contested. These authors provide evidence that new opportunities,

and efforts to counter them, ultimately have enhanced the importance and complexity of advocacy coalition efforts; coalitions, for instance, have formed between groups who share certain core beliefs but do not necessarily agree on secondary aspects (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Meanwhile, unprecedented philanthropic dollars are being applied to these lobbying and advocacy efforts, in an effort to gain leverage over the direction of public spending and policy (Confessore, 2011).

Thus, the current educational landscape is complex, and many individuals and groups have organized to make a policy impact. To what extent are these individuals and groups advocating reforms that are empirically supported? To what extent are they rigorously questioning their premises? This is a critically important topic. For example, major reform efforts, such as charter schools, vouchers, and No Child Left Behind, are based significantly on the premise that private organizations are more effective at improving student outcome (Lubienski, 2008). However, recent findings challenge this premise; for instance, Lubienski and Lubienski (in press) found public school achievement gains to be greater than those of demographically comparable Catholic school students. Likewise, Betts and Tang (2008) synthesized findings across 14 studies of schools' impact on student achievement. They limited their analysis to studies that utilized student-level data, and the median effect size (0.005) across these studies was barely distinguishable from zero (Ravitch, 2009; Raymond & Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009). Many others have pointed to examples of major reform efforts that appeared to be based more on perceptions and politics than empirical evidence, including the effort to create comprehensive high schools, the small schools movement, the progressive education movement, and so forth (Bestor, 1953; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Conant, 1967).

When there is a substantial divide between the empirical record and policymaking, problems can result; for instance, regulation of carbon emissions is a current issue in which expert-generated knowledge is often trumped by political operatives (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Specter, 2010). It is essential that we policy researchers consider both the empirical basis for such grand reforms as well as the political agendas advocating for policies. One way to do this is to consider the degree to which advocates for such reforms have discernible expertise around the policies that they promote. An instrumentalist perspective on policymaking would suggest that individuals with true expertise around these policy issues are more likely to advocate for policies that are empirically substantiated; therefore, they are preferable as policy influencers to individuals who do not possess high levels of expertise (Davies & Nutley, 2008). Particularly when policies and related beliefs hold consequences for others' welfare, beliefs arguably should

be substantiated and firmly grounded (Bridges & Watts, 2008).

### The Role of Expertise in Education Policy

Kingdon (2003), in his classic work, explored policy and agenda setting. Although Kingdon does not focus on educational policy, his conclusions can be extrapolated into that context. The complexities of these topics are made eminently clear: multiple forces interact to determine which issues reach the agenda, and what new laws subsequently survive the policymaking process. Scientific research is but one of many potential influences on the policy process, and may be a relatively less important factor among many. For instance, researchers/academicians were rated as "very important" by only 15% of insider respondents, whereas lobbyists were rated as "very important" by fully one-third of these respondents. Meanwhile, various uncontrollable events and conditions influence agenda setting. Thus, more powerful actors or events often overshadow scientists and their research (Gormley, 2011). Indeed, this is one of the commonly cited reasons why the relations between research, policy, and practice are tenuous (Granger, Tseng, & Wilcox, n.d.).

Compounding this, at times policy windows open, presenting an opportunity for advocates of various proposals to push their favored solutions (Kingdon, 2003). Currently, just such a policy window appears to be open in educational reform in the United States, owing largely to a prevalent viewpoint that traditional approaches are unacceptably ineffective for today's students. The federal government is incentivizing this process: *Race to the Top* has been designed to advance major, specific policies across the states ("Race to the Top Fund," 2012). Against this reform-happy backdrop, forces aside from research may be particularly formidable in the effort to advance favored solutions that may or may not be supported by robust research. Meanwhile, as noted previously, interest groups have increased in number, scope, and complexity, and philanthropic dollars have increased to unprecedented levels (Debray et al., 2007).

Thus, as a result of several factors in the current educational climate, a policy window appears to be open; as such, a forceful and increasingly intricate effort to advance policy ideas ensues. As policy advocates form a greater consensus around the notion that the "status quo" is ineffective, they may promote innovations (even untested ones) with increased vigor and persuasiveness. Further, research often presents rather nuanced viewpoints on topics, and circumstances like these arguably favor more black-and-white, confident "solutions." Following the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF; see Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999), it appears that for many it may be more important to secure changes aligned with core beliefs in any way possible than, for example, to simply produce well-researched but easily ignored policy briefs. It may be more incumbent

on would-be policy influencers to form partnerships and pursue strategic approaches than to carefully and painstakingly consult the literature on a topic, some of which may conflict with a more coherent and confident narrative that begs for change. Within such a context, “proofiness” techniques, where manipulative statistical sleight-of-hand devices are employed in deceptive support of half-truths, are likely to be particularly prevalent (Seife, 2010). Educational think tank reports labeled “research,” for instance, have been critiqued on several grounds, including: they present oversimplified viewpoints; they lack firm research grounding; and/or they are authored by individuals lacking sufficient expertise (Welner, 2011). Mucciaroni and Quirk (2006) found that, while evidence is often misrepresented in congressional debates, accuracy tends to be greater when issues are of low or moderate public importance or visibility. Also, even when research is utilized, it is often used simply to justify pre-determined policy preferences (Whiteman, 1985). Therefore, research-policy relations are likely to be particularly tenuous at these times; an opportunity is present for some to capitalize upon certain reforms provided that sufficient force and persuasiveness are applied. Potentially, this could involve neglect of substantive empirical support.

Presently, a familiar narrative about schools is prevalent, and appears to be consistent with policy: American public schools, as presently structured, are failing (in spite of ample and increasing funding); teaching deficiencies are largely responsible for this, as powerful unions protect many poor teachers; alternatives to public schools (i.e., charter schools) are necessary to save many students (particularly poor, often minority students in urban areas; Ravitch, 2010; see, e.g., Brill, 2011). The documentary film *Waiting for “Superman”* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010) effectively advanced viewpoints such as these more deeply into the public consciousness; however, other groups vigorously counter these positions (e.g., see Ravitch, 2010). Interestingly, this discourse serves only to further fuel calls and support for changes, many of which are quite dramatic from a historical perspective, yet which appear to be rational when the presupposition that the present system is failing students is accepted — that is: not only must the system change within such a narrative, it must change quickly. Passion, in other words, may supersede reason when an urgent need for reform is popularly perceived.

In any case, the strength of the narrative suggests that some level of bias or power imbalance is in operation. If, for instance, a diversity of viewpoints regarding U.S education were commonly presented, it would seem more likely that a more nuanced or wide-ranging set of views would be evidenced within the public (Bushaw & Lopez, 2012). We would expect similar outcomes if media regularly sought out education scholars on policy-related educational topics. Therefore, in this

analysis we examine *the extent to which those who are most frequently cited on these topics have training or acumen in research on topics for which they are (self-) identified as experts*. Is there a discernible content bias (see McQuail, 1992), such that media disproportionately represents one side or position? We expect to be able to directly address the former question, while touching indirectly upon the latter one. To do so, we rely upon two recently constructed expert lists (Welner, Mathis, & Molnar, 2012; Hess, 2011) for names, while drawing upon several of the criteria of a third, educational impact list (Hess, 2012).

In an effort to offer a more ideologically diverse pool of sources for education reporters, Rick Hess (2011), of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, created a list of “Republican and/or Conservative (and/or libertarian) edu-thinkers” that could be solicited by journalists for expertise when writing about GOP proposals or candidates. Subsequently, Welner et al. (2012) created a list on behalf of the purportedly liberal-leaning National Education Policy Center (NEPC) with the intention of pointing out to reporters the names of individuals who can speak to “the overall knowledge base” in given areas of policy. This was likely predicated on a desire to enhance the quality of reporting regarding educational issues. The intents and purposes of these lists are substantially different; however, we expect that in combination the two lists yield a useful number and variety of educational experts and thinkers for the purposes of the current study, which aims to assess the current relationship between educational expertise and media impact. We rely on several variables described and utilized by Hess (2012) in the publication of his 2012 RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Presence Rankings, published annually in *Education Week*. Each is described in detail in the methods section.

The research question is significant from theoretical and pragmatic perspectives. A loose relationship between expertise and solicited media or policy input, for instance, would be suggestive of content bias, and would cast increased doubt upon the use of evidence to inform and influence these debates. This, in turn, would raise questions about what is, in fact, driving the solicitation and selection of experts or pundits by the media? Are media and/or policymakers selecting would-be commentators on the basis of “justification” of a particular viewpoint, or “balance” between apparently opposing viewpoints, above any desire to present an objective view? If, alternatively, a strong relationship is discovered, confidence in present media coverage and policymaking surrounding these issues might justifiably be increased or maintained. In either case, the vast and far-ranging implications of current national educational policy in the United States are clear. It is therefore important that we enhance our understanding of the strength of the current relationship between research

evidence and both media coverage and policymakers' considerations.

Based upon the literature we have discussed above, we expect generally to find weak and/or negative relationships between our measures of expertise (independent variables) and our measures of media impact (dependent variables). The current climate surrounding education reform is more conducive to the solicitation of individuals better characterized as pundits than as individuals with bona fide expertise in relevant areas. Also, we expect to find distinction in expertise and media impact between the two lists that we used to derive names — specifically, that Hess's (2011) list will show a pattern of individuals with higher impact and lower expertise scores, and that Welner et al.'s (2012) NEPC list, by contrast will show the reverse. Such patterns are predicted based upon Welner's (2011) observation that conservative groups appear to be more willing to fund activities that directly engage with the political process. The individuals on Hess's (2011) list were explicitly chosen based upon conservative ideology, and therefore we might expect to find relatively more individuals whose primary concerns are oriented toward direct policy engagement or impact; by contrast, the NEPC list (Welner et al., 2012) is not explicitly weighted toward a particular political ideology but appears to be more heavily weighted toward college/university researchers and academics, whose primary concerns may be oriented more toward demonstrating expertise (e.g., scholarly publications), although they might be accused of representing a more liberal bias. The NEPC list is organized by policy topic and lists, for each topic, several individuals who could speak as experts regarding the quality of the research evidence related to a particular policy (Welner et al., 2012). Altogether, we expect that these comparisons may yield a clearer view of the type and quality of contributions to public opinion and policy within various forums.

### Methods

In this study, we examined the extent to which media, including blogs, are soliciting or otherwise citing individuals with expertise in their coverage or examination of educational policy. In order to do so, we relied on two recently constructed expert lists and drew upon the criteria used within a third, while adding one criterion of our own: educational attainment, represented by highest degree earned. This process led us to identify ninety-seven individuals, none of whom were named of both lists: all individuals but one (95) were included in the final analysis; for this individual, we were unable to identify educational background. We treated three criteria—education press mentions, blog mentions, newspaper mentions—in combination as a dependent variable representing “media impact.” We included blog mentions because we view blogs as a form of (social)

media, and as one important means of making a media impact. Hess (2011) also used each of these variables as measures of “impact.” We treated four criteria—educational attainment, Google Scholar-listed publications, book points, and highest Amazon ranking—in combination as an independent variable representing “expertise.”

Our independent variable represents our attempt to quantify displays of expertise: educational attainment, scholarly articles, and books (both number and popularity). The book metrics may be limited in that not all books are meant to be scholarly, nor do they necessarily display expertise, since scholars in some fields tend to prefer other publication formats. To address this, we repeated our regression analyses using a narrower independent variable comprised only of educational attainment and scholarly articles.

Our dependent variables represent our attempt to quantify media impact. Initially, we had intended to include citations in the Congressional Records as had Hess (2011). However, we abandoned this variable because we reasoned that Congressional Records mentions are not clearly measures of media impact. Also, upon review we discovered that only a small percentage of individuals on our lists were mentioned in the Record during the duration of this analysis. Education press mentions, blog mentions, and newspapers in combination represented our effort to capture three of the most influential forms of media. We acknowledge the potential limitation of exclusion of other forms of media, such as television and radio media.

By examining the correlations between our independent and dependent variables, we aimed to ascertain the relationship between expertise and opportunities to weigh in on current educational policy debates.

### Measures

Aside from the first measure to be described, educational attainment, we modeled all other measures after the approach outlined by Hess (2012). We departed from Hess only in that we modified the date ranges to be consistent with the timeframe of our study. Hess's study examined this measure up to December 21 or 22, 2011; in the present study, we used March 1, 2012 as our end date for all measures, except where otherwise noted. For all measures, as a final precaution we examined our obtained values in relationship to values that Hess (2011) reported. Although we used different date parameters and therefore expected to see somewhat different results, we reasoned that significant departures would raise the possibility of a flawed search. Also, for all measures we used middle initials in secondary searches for some individuals with relatively common names, in an effort to cull out same or similarly named individuals. Below, we provide substantial detail about each measure; the reader is

advised to refer to Hess (2012) for more detail.

#### Independent Variables

**Educational Attainment.** Via Google searches conducted in early March 2012, we located and recorded the highest level of educational attainment of each individual. We treated Juris Doctor, Doctor of Philosophy, and Doctor of Education degrees as equivalent, and the highest level of attainment possible. Next, we treated all Master's Degrees as equivalent, followed by all Bachelor's degrees. These were coded as twelve, eight, and four points, respectively. We did not award points for coursework that did not eventuate in a degree. We assigned point values in this manner in an effort for this metric to carry moderate weight in the combined "expertise" variable. Initially, we had planned to account for specific area of study, but abandoned this when we concluded that all members of the combined list completed an area of study that was at least tangentially related to educational policy. The majority of individuals (83.15%) on the combined list had attained the highest level of educational attainment.

**Google Scholar Metric.** Up to March 1, 2012, we examined articles, books, or papers each individual had authored or co-authored, utilizing the following technique: First, the individual's name was entered under the "author" filter in advanced Google Scholar search, limited to "Business Administration, Finance, and Economics" and "Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities." Like Hess (2012), we took care not to count works by similarly named individuals; we inspected each record to ensure that the author listed was the same individual who we were seeking, and we conducted secondary searches using the individuals' middle initial in many cases. Descending each individual's works according to the number of times each was cited, we counted the number of works up to the point at which this number exceeded the cite count. For instance, an author who had three works that were cited at least three times, but whose fourth work is cited three or fewer times, would score a three. This measure was intended to measure the breadth and impact of a scholar's work (Hess, 2012). On this measure, individuals' scores ranged from zero to 76 points ( $M = 17.39$ ,  $SD = 16.58$ ).

**Book Points Metric.** Up to March 1, 2012, we recorded the number of books each individual had authored, co-authored, or edited, based on an Amazon author search. Similar to Hess (2012), we awarded each person two points for a single-authored book, one point for co-authored book in which he or she was the lead author (and one-half point if not the lead author), and one-half point for an edited volume. Also, like Hess (2011), we used an "Advanced Books Search" for the scholar's name, and the format searched "printed books" so as to avoid double counting. In a few instances, we also used middle initials as method of avoiding duplication with same/similarly-named authors. Only published and

available books were included. On this measure, individuals' scores ranged from zero to 37.5 points ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 7.00$ ).

**Highest Amazon Ranking Metric.** As of March 15, 2012, we recorded the author's highest-ranked book on Amazon. Similar to Hess (2012), we subtracted the highest-ranked book from 400,000, and divided the resulting number by 20,000. In this way, each individual achieved a score between zero and twenty. We completed this measure from the Amazon site, searching for books written by each of the individuals, and (if applicable) identifying the individual's top rated book. We included co-authored or co-edited books by the individual. We found that it was easiest to carry out the task when going to the individual's "Amazon author page," if it existed. This measure, Hess notes, is substantially volatile and biased in favor of recent works; however, we agree with his position that it nonetheless conveys useful information. On this measure, individuals' scores ranged from zero to 19.9 points ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 5.17$ ). The majority of individuals on the combined list (75.79%) achieved zero points on this measure.

#### Dependent Variables

**Education Press Mentions.** Like Hess (2012), we recorded the total number of times each individual was quoted or mentioned in either *Education Week* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. We counted quotes or mentions from the time period between December 1, 2011 and March 1, 2012. Similar to Hess (2012), we divided the total number of appearances by two to yield a final measure. We searched by using each scholar's first and last name, using the search tool available at each site. On this measure, individuals' scores ranged from zero to 14.5 points ( $M = 1.72$ ,  $SD = 2.96$ ), with 24.2% of individuals earning zero points on this measure.

**Blog Mentions.** We followed Hess (2012) by recording the number of times a scholar was referenced in a blog between December 1, 2011 and March 1, 2012. Departing from Hess, we searched with a combination of the individual's name and several words linked to education, separated by "OR" connectors (Name AND education OR school OR schools OR learning OR reform OR charter OR vouchers). This was done in an effort to cull out references to similarly named individuals. Like Hess (2012), we divided the total number of references by four in arriving at a final figure, which we capped at fifty points. On this measure, individuals' scores ranged from zero to fifty points ( $M = 23.06$ ,  $SD = 20.53$ ). Twenty-six individuals (27.4%) earned fifty points on this measure.

**Newspaper Mentions.** Like Hess (2012), we used a *Lexis Nexis* search to record the number of times each individual was quoted or mentioned in U.S. newspapers. We used the date range of January 1, 2011 to March 1, 2012. Similar to Hess (2011), we divided the resulting number of mentions by four, to yield a final measure per individual. On this measure, individuals'

scores ranged from zero to 35 points ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 5.64$ ); 10.53% of individuals earned scores of zero points.

### Results

Values of each of four previously described independent measures were added for each individual, to create a single independent measure of "expertise." Likewise, values of each of four previously described dependent measures were added for each individual, to create a single dependent measure of "media impact."

As noted previously, we hypothesized that we would find weak and/or negative relationships between our measures of expertise (independent measures) and our measures of media impact (dependent measures). In order to test our hypotheses, we performed several linear regression analyses using PASW® Statistics18.0 software. First, we examined the overall relationship between our broad expertise variable and our impact variable. In partial support of our hypothesis, we found a non-significant

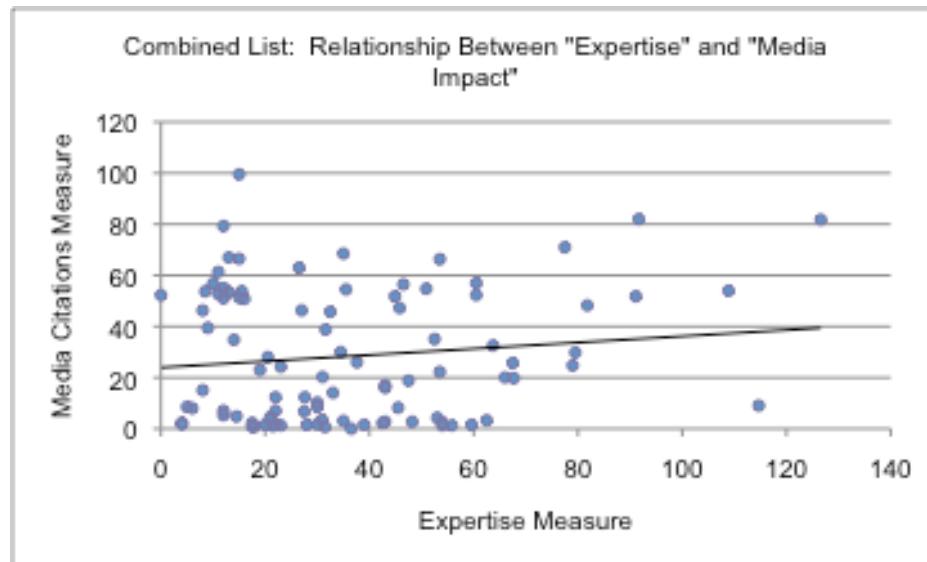


Figure 1. The relationship between "expertise" and "media impact" for individuals identified on either list (combined list).

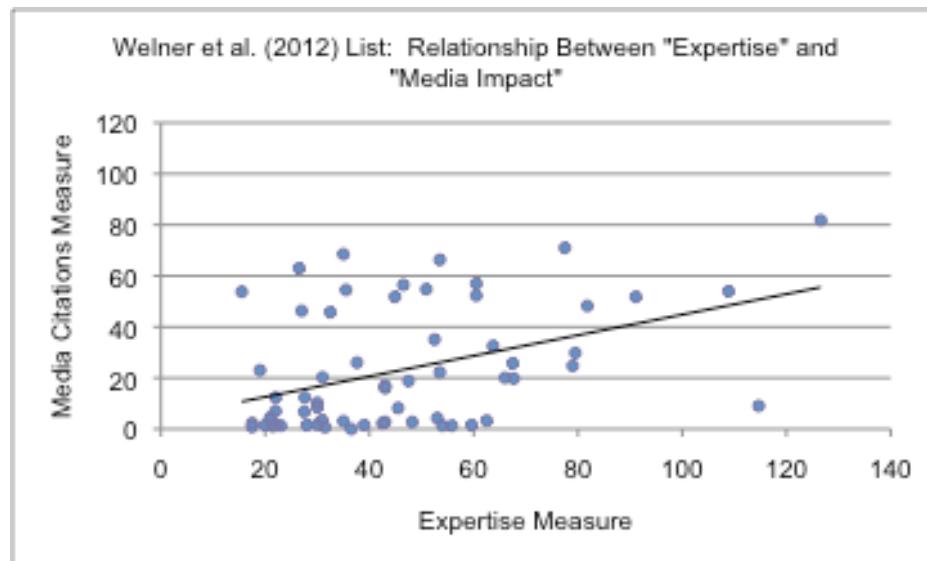


Figure 2. The relationship between "expertise" and "media impact" for individuals identified on the Welner et al. (2012) list.

positive relationship, such that increases in expertise loosely and non-significantly associated with increases in media impact among these individuals — expertise explained just 2% of the variance in media impact ( $R^2 = 0.02, F(1, 93) = 1.86, p = 0.18$ ), as shown in Figure 1.

Second, we examined the overall relationship between our more constrained expertise variable (encompassing only educational attainment and scholarly articles measures) and media impact. In this case as well, we found a non-significant positive relationship, such that increases in this measure of expertise loosely and non-significantly associated with increases in media impact among these individuals ( $R^2 = 0.01, F(1, 93) = 1.08, p = 0.30$ ).

Third, we examined the relationship between expertise, broadly defined, and media impact for individuals named on the Welner et al. (2012) NEPC list. In this case, we found a significant positive relationship between our measure of expertise and our measure of media impact,  $R^2 = 0.42, F(1, 60) = 12.87, p = .001$ . Individuals on this list tended to score higher on the measures of expertise ( $M = 46.09, SD = 24.51$ ) than on

the measures of media impact ( $M = 23.08, SD = 23.53$ ), as shown in Figure 2.

Finally, we examined the relationship between expertise, broadly defined, and media impact for individuals named on the Hess (2011) list. In this case, we found a non-significant positive relationship, such that increases in expertise were loosely and non-significantly associated with increases in media impact,  $R^2 = 0.28, F(1, 31) = 0.88, p = 0.36$ . Also, we found a non-significant positive relationship between the narrow measure of expertise and media impact,  $R^2 = 0.06, F(1, 31) = 1.90, p = 0.18$ , as shown in Figure 3.

In contrast to the prior list, individuals on the Hess list tended to score higher on the media impact measure ( $M = 37.57, SD = 26.94$ ), and lower on the broad ( $M = 18.55, SD = 17.44$ ) and narrow ( $M = 15.85, SD = 13.18$ ) expertise measures. Figure 4 provides a graphical representation of the differences in mean values across the expertise and broad media impact measures, by list. Table 1 includes a summary of statistics for each of the separate regression analyses we performed, using broadly defined expertise.

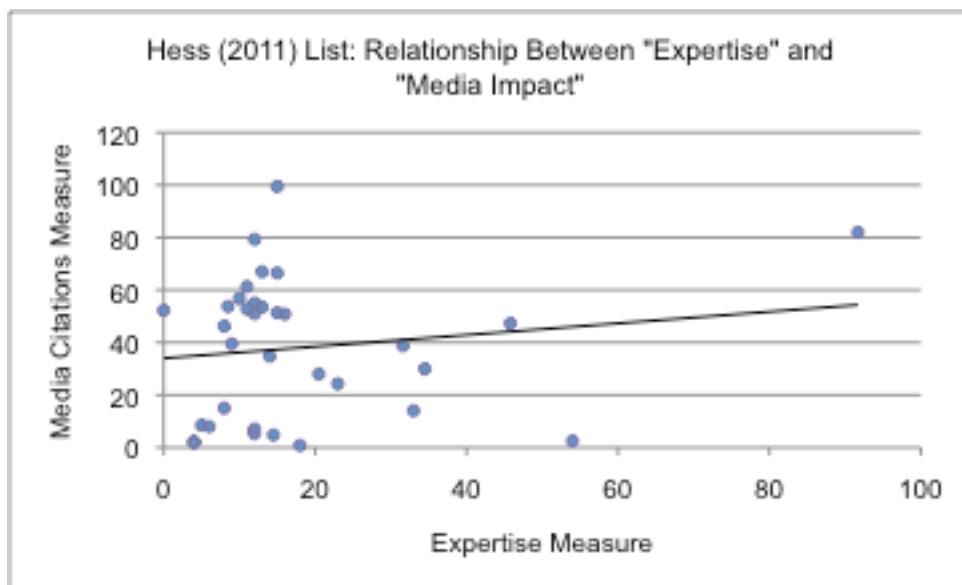


Figure 3. The relationship between “expertise” and “media impact” for individuals identified on the Hess (2011) list.

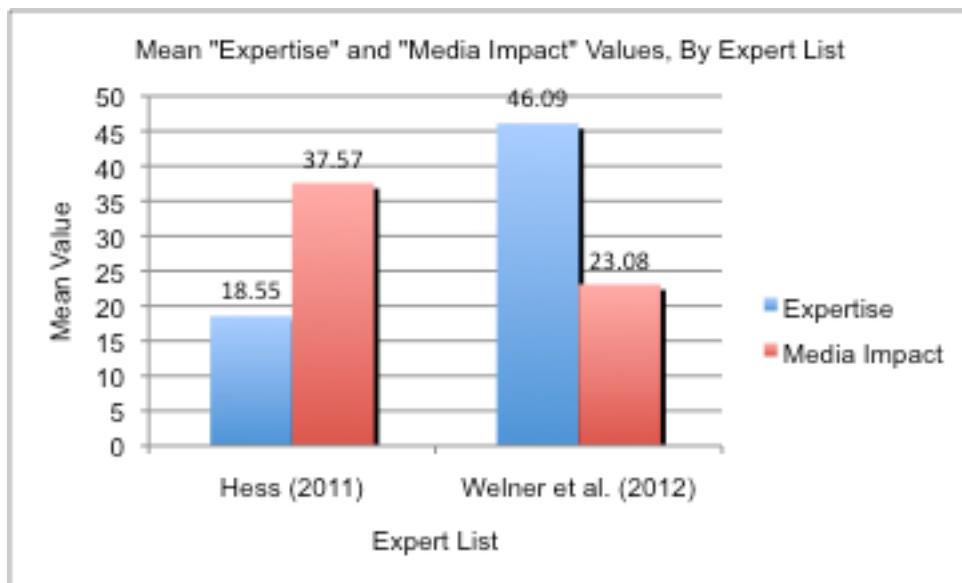


Figure 4. Mean values of “expertise” and “media impact” (broad measure), by expert list.

Table 1

*Summary of Separate Regression Analyses of Expertise (By Expert List: Individual and Combined) and Media Impact*

Variable	B	SE(B)	$\beta$	t	Sig.(p)
Expertise – Hess (2011) List ( $N = 33$ )	0.26	0.27	0.17	0.94	.36
Expertise – Welner (2012) List ( $N = 62$ )	0.40	0.11	0.42	3.59	.00*
Expertise – Combined List ( $N = 95$ )	0.14	0.10	0.14	1.36	.18

Note.  $p = .001$

### Discussion

We were interested to review the current relationship between indicators of educational expertise and measures of media impact. We suspected that we would find generally weak and negative relationships, basing this expectation on our review of the literature and our understanding of the contemporary pressure to reform education, a pressure that is in keeping with a dominant narrative that current educational models in the U.S. are unacceptably ineffective.

Results were partially consistent with our main hypotheses. While our variables were not negatively associated as predicted, they were in nearly all cases weakly associated and/or statistically non-significant. This is consistent with a general perspective within the literature that we reviewed, which suggests that media impact (e.g., opportunities for citation) would not be

tightly related to educational expertise. We find this troubling, particularly within a broader context which is conducive to educational reform. It would be better if media (and, potentially by extension, policy) influencers possessed true expertise, or were connected with experts (Willingham, 2012).

Interestingly, expertise significantly predicted media impact when we constrained our analysis to the NEPC list. This list is distinct in that it exclusively includes academics, whereas the Hess (2011) list includes some academics and many who are outside of this sphere. We reason that many academics tend to be primarily concerned with scholarly output and related endeavors, and thus many do not necessarily seek media exposure. Within such circumstances, perhaps their output holds some predictive power over whether they will be “sought out” in the media. Yet some academics actively avoid

this time of engagement. On the other hand, the Hess (2011) list contains a substantial number of individuals who are likely to be primarily focused on making a public impact (e.g., through the media or otherwise), often irrespective of expertise as traditionally measured. If true, this would explain the distinction of results when the lists were taken separately.

Also, it is interesting to note basic distinctions across the two lists in terms of expertise and media influence. Specifically, individuals on the Welner et al. (2012) list tended to score higher on the expertise variable and lower on the media impact variable. By contrast, individuals on the Hess (2011) list tended to score higher on the media impact variable and lower on the expertise variable. This pattern of results is consistent with our expectations and is, we believe, worthy of future study. It is consistent with Welner's (2011) observation that conservative groups tend to be more willing to directly engage with politics on educational questions. Conservative individuals are more heavily represented on the Hess (2011) list. If there is a tendency toward interest in *policy engagement* (and, we expect, *media impact*) amongst this sample, there may be a tendency among academics (who appear to be more heavily represented on the Welner et al., 2012 list) toward greater interest in *establishing expertise*. Also, "media impact" is likely quite variable as a function of what is important at a given time; at one time, for example, school funding may be a popular topic, whereas at another teacher quality may be an area of emphasis. Presumably, different individuals would be tapped into depending on the topic.

### **Limitations**

One important limitation of the study is that it draws from somewhat constrained lists of educational experts and pundits. It is also biased somewhat in favor of academics, who are exclusively listed on the Welner et al. (2012) list, and conservatives, who are exclusively listed on the Hess (2011) list. This sets up a questionable dichotomy of two sets of experts, where academics are presumed to be liberal, and think tank types are of a more conservative bent — yet we know that the actual universe of educational expertise is much more diverse. Indeed, many of the individuals who are frequently quoted in the media on educational topics (e.g., those from the Fordham Institute or the American Enterprise Institutes) are not included in our analyses. Had the lists been constructed differently and included such individuals, perhaps our results would be different. Finally, our measures of expertise focused on academic preparation, and did not take into account other factors, such as experience, that could contribute to expertise.

### **Directions for Future Study**

Still, this study suggests several potential directions for future research. The results, suggesting that media impact is at best loosely coupled to expertise, are troubling and point to the responsibility of the media to

vet experts before citing them or their work — an issue that should be explored in greater depth. Meanwhile, the suggestion from ACF that media impact may differ somewhat as a function of strategies by groups of different ideologies and backgrounds is interesting, and is tentatively supported in this study. Future study should be aimed to better understand the contours of this situation.

Lastly, we would like to join the growing chorus of individuals who seek to re-establish tighter relations between research, policy, and practice. A high quality education is immensely beneficial for individuals and states/nations (Alexander, 1976), and policy changes should be carefully discussed and weighed prior to implementation. This is most likely to occur when individuals with true expertise, who may be more grounded by empirical findings related to particular reforms, are positioned to inform the process.

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