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What Did You Learn In School Today?: The Recursive Relationship Between Media Coverage Of Public Education And The Crafting Of Education Policy

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THE RECURSIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA COVERAGE

OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THE CRAFTING OF EDUCATION

POLICY

By

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How does the public learn about issues in contemporary education policy? While changes in the economics of the media industry have shifted the mass media landscape, local communities continue to receive information about the state of their local schools primarily through local newspapers or television stations. It is arguably the most important task of a local paper to provide education coverage, as the schools are often the primary beneficiary of local tax revenues. This thesis reviews the literature surrounding the interface between education reporting and the crafting of education policy, examines the way in which education stories are framed by the media, and then assesses the skills, needs, and resources available to education journalists as it outlines limitations to robust coverage.

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Preface

In the fall of 2013, in a seminar on Mass Media and Government, I was tasked with developing a policy proposal addressing some intersection between media and government. As a transplant from the College of Education taking this class in the College of Journalism – and as a documentary filmmaker by training – I gravitated toward an education-related topic. Based on a commonly repeated complaint in education circles about the lack of quality coverage of education topics, I began with the following question: How are education stories in mass media researched and written? As I began my research, frustration at a lack of information – in part due to the sheer difficulty of finding search terms that led to the topic –dissipated when I discovered a small body of research that fueled a developing theory: that a recursive relationship exists between education reporting and the implementation of education policy. In fact, examining this relationship might reveal that the ways in which topics are reported may not only influence policy implementation, but may in fact shape the way policymakers develop policies in the first place: by crafting policies that will garner media attention. In each of the studies I found, the authors called for more research in the field. Seeing evidence of an intersection of fields ripe for further research and inspired by the likes of writers like Jonathan Kozol (the contemporary Upton Sinclair of public education writing)[1] whose intent has been to bring pressing issues in education into the public spotlight, I began to shape a policy proposal to address this problem diagnosis – I was committed to finding a way to bring this issue to light**.**

From that policy proposal (see Appendix A), I expanded my research to integrate studies on discourse analysis of media coverage of education stories, as well as attention to the way in which the neoliberal logic of market forces impacts both the world of education and of journalism. Based on a review of the existing literature, I was led to conclude that further geographically specific research – such as a study of the media landscape in Nebraska and the political climate that might impact the viability of various proposals – is needed before appropriate policy responses for federal, state and local contexts can be crafted.[2] What I present, therefore, is a thesis that integrates a combination of research in journalism and education policy that makes the case for why this recursive relationship exists in the public sphere of media and education, while also arguing that until it is acknowledged and addressed, it will continue to have a deeply limiting effect on the depth and substance of the public discourse related to education in the United States. As such, this is a topic of critical importance to the nation. Nominalizing only certain groups who ought to be concerned dismisses the fact that this comes to bear on all members of the public and is therefore a core concern for civic society.

Chapter 1: It's all about the test, but why? – An example to explain the relationship

Because of the complicated nature of analyzing the interface of two complex systems, it can be difficult to find a beginning. In order to examine what goes into the process of covering a policy topic in education, it is illustrative to begin with an example familiar, at least on a basic level, to almost anyone in the United States.

If we were to conduct a person-on-the-street interview asking passers-by to name the biggest issues in K-12 education right now, it is likely that standardized testing would be listed in the first few topics. Policymakers, driven by the charge of accountability to taxpayers to somehow demonstrate that schools are using tax dollars effectively to educate students, pass laws mandating standardized testing of all students. In turn, state and local education agencies work in conjunction with national testing companies to develop subject- and grade-level testing, which is then passed down to local districts to implement. Teachers have seen their professional development days become shaped by the need to adapt curriculum to meet the standards that are tested in state and national assessments. Administrators have shifted school schedules to accommodate additional time for reading and mathematics instruction in response to low test scores. Parents know about standardized tests because they are asked to ensure their children receive a good night of sleep and breakfast during the days of testing, and sometime later in the year (or the year following) receive an often-cryptic score report about their child's test performance. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002; Bush, 2001) such standardized tests have increasingly become a high-stakes affair, as schools are threatened with losses of federal funding commensurate with poor performance.

Absent in this scenario? *Why?* Why has this 'logic' become common sense, despite ample research demonstrating that such normative assessments are highly inaccurate measures of student learning, and thus fundamentally inappropriate for use as high-stakes arbiters of education policy decisions (Apple, 2006, 2007; Gerstl-Pepin, 2002; Phillips, 2014; Valenzuela, 2005)?

Consider local newspaper reports.[3] Typical codes of writing come into play at a newspaper, norms by which reporters and editors assemble the news for their particular readership. The front page likely has headlining stories about city and state politics, campaigns during election season, or any crime stories falling under the journalistic adage "if it bleeds, it leads." Other front-page news might relate to business, or, particularly in a state like Nebraska, sports. Because of the nature of news outlets to tell current stories, reports tend to be event-based, with value placed on their relative immediacy. Events tend to provide opportunities for photos, too, an aspect critical to a story's inclusion on a front page. If a leading story is not event-based, it could be classified as one in which the press holds a government or corporate entity accountable, and it might be accompanied by graphics showing statistics, rankings, or other measurement tools. However, a dominant characteristic many of these types of stories share is their ability to be framed within a discourse of winners and losers.

Enter standardized testing, the consummate double-whammy of event-based and accountability reporting. As policymakers craft the legislation, the press is able to highlight the role of tests as a measure by which schools can be compared, with debate, hearings or passage of legislation or policy constituting an event worthy of press coverage. Seeing that the press has then covered the passage of said legislation, the story becomes a topic on the public's radar, and thus one for which administrators and teachers prepare themselves to be held accountable through the lens of the media. The administration of the test itself might constitute an event-based story accompanied by a photo of children filling in bubble sheets or clicking on a computer screen. Finally, the release of test scores is both an event and an accountability story, as it is likely to be done

through a press conference of school leaders, replete with charts, numbers, and rankings. It might include the views of teachers or students, but the focus is really on the numbers at this point; the discourse is dominated by institutional authority rather than teacher knowledge (Cohen, 2010).[4] The press, throughout this process, has been given a fairly easy story to tell, and one that easily fits the discourse of winners and losers (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002). What is lost, however, is any nuance within the process: the story of test development, its impact on students, its effects on teachers, or any clear determination of whether or not tests effectively measure anything at all substantive about the schools and student learning. *That* would be a very different story to tell – and it probably wouldn't be on the front page. And while some larger media outlets such as the New York Times are beginning to question the validity of testing, challenging standardized testing is far from common at the local level (Phillips, 2014).

This is but one example of a cycle in which policy is crafted so that it garners press coverage; press coverage then makes a policy relevant. Schools respond to this attention by focusing their efforts on implementation based on fear of failure; potentially, further policy is crafted in response to press coverage about that failure. In order to better understand reasons for the existence of this recursive process, multiple domains of analysis are worth pursuing. First, it is helpful to understand the civic status of schools and the press in contemporary U.S. culture, from a sociological and political perspective. A focus on language is aided by the introduction of critical discourse analysis. Next, it is important to note what formal rules and regulations limit media access in schools, as well as what sorts of informal restrictions come into play. Then, it is interesting to examine how journalists learn their trade, and what skills and resources they utilize to frame

stories about education. Because the nature of this topic is quite broad in scope, it is challenging to narrow a conclusion to one policy recommendation to remedy gaps in coverage. Therefore, this paper concludes with appendices containing emerging avenues by which this cycle of policy and reporting might be addressed.

Chapter 2: Surveying the Fields and Their Intersections

Education policy is a complex topic involving many actors – boards of education, policymakers in state and federal legislative branches, chief state school officers, school administrators, teachers, teaching assistants, producers and distributors of educational resources and curricula, post-secondary teacher education programs, and researchers in education – not to mention students, parents, and community members. Even for those working within the system, it can be difficult to stay abreast of policies and their impacts, as public education topics in the United States seem as diverse as the population itself.

Because of its effect on all sectors of the population, education is arguably the most important topic a local media outlet covers – it is typically an issue that evokes passionate reactions from the public. A city newspaper has the power, through its education reporting, to shape the discourse on schools in that community. How do media outlets address this need, particularly in light of shrinking reporting staffs? Foundational to this discussion is the way in which the fields of journalism and education are situated within civil society. Public schools, despite the many complaints leveraged against them, remain a primary site for preparing children in this country for adulthood in civic society, and as such are viewed as a cornerstone of democracy (Levinson, 2012; Westheimer &

Kahne, 2004). Furthermore, Gallup polls have found that the U.S. public consistently ranks education as a primary issue of concern in national elections, and education is a topic focused on by politicians, regardless of their expertise in policy; therefore, it is critical for candidates to address education within their policy platforms (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002). Indeed, the policy report *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, Larsen, & Baker, 1983) – developed by federal education officials and masterfully spun by the Reagan Administration to usher in many neoliberal reforms – still holds sway in the shaping of education policy more than thirty years later, despite how little of the report's recommendations are understood by politicians or the public (Berliner & Glass, 2014).

As Jennifer Cohen (2010) explains in her analysis of education coverage in the Chicago *Tribune,* "One of the most powerful sites for influencing public debate over education policy is mainstream news media, which have been recognized as heteroglossic discursive sites that produce and reproduce the ideological dimensions of public discourse" (p. 106). Critical theorist Jürgen Habermas (1974) argued that the emergence of mass media in the eighteenth century represented the beginning of the concept of a public sphere, and concurrently the development of the concept of public opinion. He argued that mass media formed "a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion," and further, that this development "accords with the principle of the public sphere – that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities" (Habermas, 1974, p. 50). This shift radically transformed the role of the media, he argues, from one of disseminating public notices to one that exercised tremendous power to

shape public opinion (Habermas, 1974). Habermas posits, however, that while the transformative dominance of the public sphere initially exposed many powerful institutions to scrutiny by making their proceedings and information about them public, the role of the public has since weakened, as scrutiny gives way to the influence of publicity controlled by special interests who are able to more deftly navigate the systems created by bureaucracies (Habermas, 1974).

The media also plays a distinct role in establishing the terms of the debate by shaping stories based on accepting baseline premises without question. For example, in her analysis of education related coverage in the 2000 presidential election, Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin (2002) found that reporters routinely took only the views of the two presidential candidates – and none from alternative viewpoints critiquing both positions – in reporting. She cites a *Time* magazine article in which "the author accepted the base premise of both sides that failing schools are the problem. Although each candidate offered a seemingly different solution, they have already dramatically narrowed the field of debate by constructing the educational problem in simplistic terms" (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002, p. 48). Certainly, this is problematic on a national scale, particularly because of the way in which the framing of national stories trickles down into local coverage. However, as argued by Hamann & Reeves (2012), the local media serve as a means of understanding whose voices are heard – and in what degree of veracity – by their placement in front page stories, letters-to-the-editor, or comments.

While it is common in the United States to view government and media separately, this is not the case in media systems worldwide. As explained in Hallin & Mancini's (2004) excellent comparative and historical analysis of media systems,

government funding of public information is essential to the function of democracy. As they suggest, "the state always plays an important role as a source of information and 'primary definer of news'…with enormous influence on the agenda and framing of public issues" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 44). In their investigation of the North-Central European model of media and politics, they cite Karl Bücher's influence in journalism education in Germany, in which he argued that "journalists were similar to civil servants in their social functions and that systematic journalism education for that reason be supported by the state" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 195). In the United States, however, journalists are not typically viewed as civil servants, despite their influential position. Because they are "a site of contested meanings about America's education goals, problems and solutions, the media have tremendous impact on how Americans think about these issues and, in turn, on the design and implementation of education policy" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 4). And concurrent with trends in downsizing and consolidation of media (McChesney & Nichols, 2010; Picard, 2011) that have reduced the capacity of local outlets to invest in robust and in-depth coverage of such topics, the world of education policy has become both broader and more complex (Hancock, 2005). As one public institution becomes more complex, the one long expected to explain its workings is less and less equipped to do so.

Another question fundamental to this discussion is the way in which the role of school has been defined – and is evolving – in contemporary U.S. society. The concept of free and public education for all children is quite new, despite its status as a cornerstone institution in a democracy (J. W. Fraser, 2007). Beyond the question of whether all children have the right to an education is what that education ought to entail. Is the

purpose of education to serve the needs of creating a robust civil society of moral citizens or a robust economy of productive workers (Apple, 2004; Counts, 1978; Dewey, 1909; Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1988; Levinson, 2012)? As such, the notion of public school is entwined with the creation of the nation-state, because regardless of whether one argues for schools as incubators of civil society or of the economy, their very existence as collective structures for learning is by nature anti-libertarian. Schools are centers of community, and often serve as gathering places for people of differing viewpoints, particularly in times of increasing political polarization (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). When schools are closed, neighborhoods and communities suffer (Kretchmar, 2011; Strauss, 2013).

One underlying challenge emerging in both fields is the increasing influence of neoliberalism in determining the framing of policy issues. As Wells, Slayton, and Scott explain:

> For the last 10 years, an increasingly popular connotation of democracy in the United States is that it represents the freedom to consume and own within a capitalist society. In education, the implication was freedom to choose schools and freedom from state regulation. (2002, p. 338)

Just as education is impacted by neoliberal logic through the emergence of charter schools and privatization of public schools, so too are newspapers and local broadcast affiliates transitioning from family-owned enterprises to subsidiaries of large, corporate-owned media conglomerates (Picard, 2011). If the media is to respond to the needs of stockholders rather than to the drive to tell the best story, then the resources of the newsroom will shift to respond to the bottom line (Picard, 2011). Journalists have long

operated under a set of norms related to covering political topics, including providing an overview of opinions that provides fairness and objectivity and the promotion of political accountability (Bennett, 1996). Increasingly, however, the demands of corporate ownership lead reporters to rely on official press releases and press conferences, meeting the business demands of efficiency and cost reduction in reporting staffs (Bennett, 1996; Levin, Sohn, & Maharaj, 2013; Picard, 2011).

Political theorist Jodi Dean (2002) brings Habermas's theory of the public sphere into the digital age in her book *Publicity's Secret*, and as such, she merges the logic of publicity with the dominance of capitalism, arguing that consumption *becomes* democracy. In defining what it means to be informed in the technological age, she argues:

> Public knowledge becomes condensed as what *you* know. If the information age is the new political hegemony, its ideology is the public sphere. The presumed value of information – the public must know – morphs political action into compliant practices of consumption: good citizens must have magazines, televisions, Internet access. (Dean, 2002, p. 35)

Rather than praising the expansion of media as an extension of Habermas's (1974) call for greater publicity, she decries the fact that "media sensationalize their reports, reduce complex statements to sound bites, and depend on corporate goodwill for advertising revenue" while they "nevertheless continue to proclaim that the public has a right to know and that the media will and should provide us with information" (Dean, 2002, p. 39). Again, the underlying logic of neoliberalism transforms what looks like a democratic

movement of increased information into an expansion of the market that is the media

economy, rather than an increase in the quality or depth of the reporting.

As national political rhetoric is dominated by questions of global competitiveness,

the state of the economy through the Great Recession, and the still-volatile

unemployment rate and shifting jobs sector, schools are portrayed by politicians

antithetically as both failure and solution. Federal education policies such as No Child

Left Behind set up a discourse of failure that perpetuates reporting based on numbers and

statistics rather than, for example, the ethnographic accounts of schools, teachers, or

students (Cohen, 2010). Coverage of 'failing' schools lends itself readily to establishing

the performance of schools as a public crisis. Indeed, as Cohen (2010) writes:

> The crisis discourse surrounding education is grounded in a neo-liberal
>
> economic model featuring charges that schools are not preparing the type
>
> of worker needed to preserve these nations' dominant position in a
>
> changing global market, and promoting market based reforms such as
>
> privatization and voucher programs. (p. 117)

Put more simply, "failure seems to make better headlines than hard-won, slow success"

(Apple & Beane, 2007, pp. 24–25). While attention to market forces and the global

economy's role in influencing education policy is certainly warranted, it becomes deeply

problematic if the role of schools in preparing workers is the primary focus of education

reporting. Indeed, such focus calls into question the status of schools as an integral part of

democratic society, if their primary role is solely defined by their value to the economy.

To put it another way, if schools were truly run as businesses looking to maximize the

returns on their investments, wouldn't they turn away five-year-olds who didn't look like "school material" upfront, rather than spending years investing in their education?

Chapter 3: A Brief Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis

Before delving deeper into the literature related to education policy and its coverage in the media, it is helpful to introduce the transdisciplinary research movement of critical discourse analysis (CDA), as it serves as a useful framework for dissecting press coverage. As defined by Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, "CDA is a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement, subsuming a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda" (2011, p. 357). As such, CDA "emphasizes the way in which language is implicated in issues such as power and ideology that determine how language is used, what effect it has, and how it reflects, serves, and furthers the interests, positions, perspectives, and values of, those who are in power" (Waugh, Catalano, Al Masaeed, Hong Do, & Renigar, 2014, p. 2). As explained by van Dijk (1991), because of its rhetorical style and brevity, much news coverage relies on implication, meaning that many pieces of a story may be left out under the presumption that the readership will fill in details. It is particularly useful to employ van Leeuwen's (2008) theory of representation of social actors, as the way in which the press refers to various people and institutions involved in education policy is telling for the way in which it establishes power relationships. In particular, nomination and categorization as well as functionalization are heavily employed in press coverage, for, as van Leeuwen (2008) points out in *Discourse and Practice* "high-status social actors…such as

'government' and 'experts,' are always functionalized" (p. 45). Furthermore, in newspaper coverage in particular, there is a great deal of exclusion, anonymization, suppression and backgrounding in play (Machin & Mayr, 2012), as press coverage favors the opinions of elected representatives, state education officials, and representatives of think tanks over those of parents, teachers, or students.

Much of critical discourse analysis examines the use of metaphor and metonymy, and this is certainly at play in education news coverage. Metaphor, as defined by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), is "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action," such that "our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people" (p. 3). The first example they present to illustrate the pervasiveness of metaphor is the conceptual structure of ARGUMENT AS WAR (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In mapping this metaphor into the world of education policy, this conceptual structure can be slightly modified to specify POLITICS AS WAR. As I will argue in further chapters, much press coverage relies on official sources such as politicians and elected officials for quotations in education stories, and furthermore, press coverage tends to rely on telling two sides to a story. As such, metaphors that set up sides opposed in battle, attacks on various policy initiatives, and a discourse of winners and losers all fit neatly within the concept structure of POLITICS AS WAR. Metonymies, as defined in Kövecses (2008) are "unlike conceptual metaphors," in that they "involve a single domain, or concept. The purpose of metonymy is to provide mental access to a domain through a part of the same domain (or vice versa) or to a part of a domain through another part in the same domain" (p. 381). Using shorthand that maps PART FOR WHOLE, it is possible to find numerous instances in which one component of schooling

is used to represent the whole system, where one student's experience is used to illustrate the student experience more generally, or where a school official, in conjunction with the type of metaphorical concept structure discussed above, comes to stand for public education.

Nancy Fraser (1992) argues that Habermas's conception of the public sphere is in fact an oppressive metaphorical space, in that it is one in which critical dialogue about inequality cannot occur – "it designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (pp. 110-111). It is also useful to refer to Catalano & Waugh's (2013) discussion of metonymies in financial discourse as a point of reference in examining education policy coverage, particularly because of the way in which the education reform movement is connected to neoliberalism and market logic. As they note, policy actors on opposing sides of a debate "often use the same terms adopted by those coming from the opposite ideological frame, and thus are not able to get their message across to the public effectively" (Catalano & Waugh, 2013, p. 32). (For a chart of metaphors and metonymies found in Nebraska press coverage of charter school legislation, see Figure 1, Appendix D.)

While news pieces featuring one or two people can be quite helpful in telling a story, critical discourse analysts would remind us to take note of the ways in which the people selected for individual stories come to occupy prominence of normalcy in our minds – and what is obscured or omitted in the process of telling one person's story over someone else's. Another component of critical discourse analysis, to be addressed in

more depth in Chapter 5, is framing. Frames, as defined by Kövecses (2006), are "tightly

organized conceptual structures with a manageable number of elements" (p. 97). In other

words, a frame provides a rhetorical structure for the logic of relationships in one

discipline to be mapped onto another through use of metaphor and metonymy. As

Meadows (2007) claims, metaphor has incredible potential as a political tool, and coupled

with metonymies that map CHARTER SCHOOL FOR TEACHER, provide a powerful

structure for obscuring the powerless and granting "common sense"[5] delegation of power

to political elites. In order for the public to make sense of policy ideas, they are often

categorized under broad theoretical frames, which, as Béland (2005) defines them, are "a

discourse that helps political actors to sell policy choices to the public" (p. 11). Far from

neutral, however, framing the issue is "a strategic and deliberate activity aimed at

generating public support for specific policy ideas" (Béland, 2005, p. 11). Further, as the

press interprets and frames a topic in education, it deftly skirts the line of telling the

public what to think, but has a profound impact on shaping what the public thinks *about*;

in other words, what is covered becomes a topic of discussion, where what is omitted is

forgotten or obscured (De Vreese, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). It is also important to

note that both the press and the institutions they cover exist in social fields typically

hierarchized above the audience to which their coverage is disseminated, which

reinforces power and expertise away from the public and to the framers (Bourdieu, 1985;

Lingard & Rawolle, 2004).

An investigation of the ways in which reporters frame education stories also

reveals deep seated patterns of metonymy. As Stack (2007) explains, "busy journalists

may construct a school or a community as representative of all schools or all

communities. The specifics are not important" (p. 255). This is a striking example of PART FOR WHOLE, as one school comes to represent all schools. Furthermore, it is common for journalists to cultivate relationships with sources in schools with which they have some connection, such as having their own child in attendance (Stack, 2007). Naturally, then, the schools that become their representations of the mainstream or average school tend to reflect their own socioeconomic background, which tends to be middle class (Stack, 2007). In the process, by the selection of one part to represent the whole, they obscure the differences in schools at the farther-flung ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. This, in turn, leads to an "us versus them" dichotomy, which becomes critical in an investigation of the way in which issues such as charter schools are discussed. Because charter schools are typically introduced as a solution to problems in urban education, they are not targeted at the socioeconomic class journalists view as the mainstream, and are thus part of the "them." Again, as discussed by van Leeuwen (2008), press coverage can be analyzed in terms of "a class-related pattern of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 29). (In examining the infancy of the charter school debate in Nebraska, the controversial nature of the topic lends itself to being situated within a frame of critical discourse analysis. For an example of critical discourse analysis in Nebraska press coverage of education, see Appendix D.)

Chapter 4: Rules governing media access in schools – from formal to informal

While the economic, sociological and political situation of the fields of education and journalism grounds this analysis, it is also important to examine more specific

structural factors that limit education reporting. First, there are a few legal parameters

that govern schools, children, and the definition of public space. Margaret Worth, Legal

Counsel to the Nebraska Department of Education, explained that the Family Educational

Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) (*Family Educational Rights Privacy Act*, 1974)[6], which

governs public access to identifiable information about students (such as test scores,

grades, or disciplinary records), does not prohibit media from speaking to or reporting

about children in schools (M. Worth, personal interview, October 11, 2013). However,

because of the special ethical considerations in play in matters dealing with children (not

to mention the skills required to interview children effectively, which will be addressed in

a later chapter), reporters may choose to cover education topics that are more definitively

occurring in public space, such as board meetings held under open meetings laws.[7] As

will be explained in greater detail below, this distinction between stories about "students"

and stories about "policy" has a profound impact on the way in which narratives about

education are shaped by the press.

> Columbia University Journalism School professor LynNell Hancock posits:
>
> Access to public school systems should be a given in a democracy (a right
>
> that demands a large helping of media responsibility). Narratives from
>
> inside and outside the classroom are powerful testaments to a shared sense
>
> of civic values, and an understanding of the role of education in sustaining
>
> a democracy. (2005, p. 28)

However, the guidelines for journalists entering schools are often unclear. In 1996,

California's Attorney General, in response to questions from a member of their state

senate, published an opinion examining what authority – if any – schools and school

administrators have in regulating media access inside of their school buildings. The

opinion, which balances First Amendment protections of access to information with the

needs of schools in ensuring safety of their students, does allow for school administrators

to:

> Require members of the news media to (1) register their presence on
>
> campus, (2) comply with other conditions for interviewing students,
>
> observing an event, or examining the curriculum being taught, and (3)
>
> leave the premises if their presence would interfere with the peaceful
>
> conduct of the activities of the school. (79 Ops. Cal. Atty. Gen., 1996, p.
>
> 58)

In its analysis, the California Attorney General's office cited instances of school violence,

disruptions to the unfettered running of school operations, and the duty of schools to

protect their students as justification for limiting access; however, it also pointed out that

journalists were specifically exempt from prosecution under California legislation

restricting access to schools (Cal. Pen. Code, §§ 627-627.11.). Furthermore, the Attorney

General found that it was not in the purview of schools to require parent permission

before journalists interviewed students within a school, in this case based on a student's

own right to free speech, dating back to the Tinker v. Des Moines School District case

(1969) 393 U.S. 503 [21 L.Ed.2d 731, 89 S.Ct. 733].[8]

While California has directly addressed this interface between schools and media,

most places around the country have not. Instead, journalists and schools typically

operate under more informal barriers to access. As Hancock (2005) writes, "Most

principals now routinely tell reporters they need permission from central headquarters

before speaking to the press – permission that rarely materializes, and certainly not on deadline" (p. 27). While school administrators may be operating with the best interests of their staff and students at heart, they are simultaneously creating and reinforcing a hierarchy that stratifies the types of stories that journalists cover. In analyzing education reporting in the Houston *Chronicle*, Hancock (2005) observes that the paper's coverage habits "were cemented in a model that kept reporters out of classrooms" (p. 22). Education reporters, she writes, "were conditioned to cover 'schools' instead of 'education,' to come at the beat from the top down by reporting on district policies without comparing them to real-life results or assessing their classroom relevance" (Hancock, 2005, p. 22). And just as reporters operate under a model that favors covering the school board meeting over in-depth stories interviewing students, so too do teachers increasingly operate under one that, based on federal education policy trends emphasizing standards and assessments, have administrators viewing press coverage with skepticism or even fear of the light that may be cast, thereby crafting internal policies that restrict media access to individual teachers. For a reporter to tell an in-depth story about the impact of a policy on a classroom, they must have access to the teacher and students, which is "an invitation that has grown ever rarer under the new era of top-down management regimes" (Hancock, 2005, p. 27). Thus, rather than risk a news story in which a teacher's work or words might be out of alignment with federal, state, or district mandates, school districts or administrators might opt to err on the side of caution by implementing policies that require the press to work with a publicist or press relations staffer rather than directly with a teacher. Furthermore, if teachers are not asked to comment on policy questions based on the logic that they are not policymakers nor

administrators, it may be a self-fulfilling prophecy that their voices are not included in discussions about policy, which marginalizes their status from critical professionals in the classroom to mere implementers of policy.

As journalists cultivate relationships with sources (discussed in more detail below), they are constantly negotiating a tension between two strands of reporting: access and accountability. Access reporting relies on the ability of reporters to secure comments from important sources, such as political figures, whereas accountability reporting focuses on scrutinizing the actions of those leaders (Starkman, 2014). Dean Starkman (2014), in his case study of the of press coverage of the financial crisis, argues, "that within the journalism 'field' a primal conflict has been between access and accountability," but that this is "hardly a fair fight" (p. 141). He explains:

> Nearly all advantages in journalism rest with access. The stories are
> generally shorter and quicker to do. Further, the interests of access
> reporting and its subjects run in harmony. Powerful leaders are, after all,
> the sources for much of access reporting's product. The harmonious
> relationship can lead to a synergy between reporter and source…As one
> effective story follows another, access reporting is able to serve a news
> organization's production needs, which tend to be voracious and
> unending…Accountability reporting requires time, spaces, expense, risk,
> and stress. It makes few friends. (Starkman, 2014, p. 141)

If this is mapped into the context of education – in particular, in a smaller community – a difficult decision for journalists ensues. If a superintendent or principal is able to restrict media access in the school building or limit contact with individual teachers, it is

problematic for a reporter to embark on an investigative accountability piece that might compromise the relationship they have with the superintendent – their primary source for access-based stories.

One case study of newspaper coverage in the Chicago *Tribune* analyzed stories specifically through a lens of discourse analysis of the grammar used to inform notions of teacher professional identity (Cohen, 2010). Jennifer Cohen (2010) found, in dissecting 170 news articles about education, that "approximately 75% of the education news stories were predominantly characterized by the grammar features of Accountability," meaning that reporters "position people as the objects of institutional actions" (pp. 109–110). As such, teachers were not treated as powerful professional experts, and "the overall effect is to foreground institutional processes over individual actions, distancing those most directly engaged in the daily social practices of formal education from authoritative knowledge about teaching and learning" (Cohen, 2010, p. 110). Further still, schools as a whole are "positioned as objects of evaluation, rather than as active agents" (Cohen, 2010, p. 111). Aside from the stories categorized under a grammar of Accountability, she classified the other 25% of stories under a discourse of Caring, in which individual anecdotes situated within classrooms and neighborhoods told stories highlighting the authority of teacher voices that stems from years of direct experience in the classroom (Cohen, 2010). Importantly, however, Cohen (2010) argues that the Accountability stories support a positivist ideology that values science, technology, and statistics as a solution to policy problems – and that teacher voices are notably absent from these stories. This valuation of statistics and "scientifically based" education research at the exclusion of ethnographic research is supported by numerous education theorists as a

troubling trend for its potential impacts in the crafting of policy (Baez & Boyles, 2009;

Hamann, 2003).

Of course, as access to individual classrooms, teachers, and students is restricted –

or mediated by a press agent – coverage suffers. Yet, there is another informal restriction

at play in this scenario, outlined by studies examining media coverage of education

through the lens of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (2005) field theory, best condensed by

Mike Wallace (1993). As he summarizes:

> Media professionals occupy a different life-world not only from most
>
> members of their audience but also from many of their sources. The
>
> dominant interest of media professionals in securing a good story
>
> according to their news values suggest that sources are likely to be treated
>
> as a means to this end. (Wallace, 1993, p. 325)

Indeed, the concerns of a reporter filing a story – such as getting interesting quotations,

citing multiple sources, and creating a good narrative – are different from those of the

classroom teacher managing a classroom full of children with differentiated learning

needs. In interviews with teachers in Britain regarding media coverage of the

implementation of an education policy proposal, Wallace (1993) found that school staff

felt negatively impacted by the cover of impartiality and distance afforded to the

television crew from the British Broadcasting Corporation. In an interview with school

staff, he finds a disconnect between the relative culpability of teachers and reporters:

> "You do not have to be answerable," one staff member said, speaking of
>
> the television reporters, adding that after filing their report, "they need

never have any knowledge or understanding of the effect they could have

on this school or this city." (Wallace, 1993, p. 332)

This differentiation in culpability – in who is held to blame if a story paints a classroom

or a school in a negative light – certainly contributes to hesitancy on the part of school

staff to speak with reporters.

Chapter 5: Who is doing the framing? Why are there two sides to a story, and whose sides are they?

How do media outlets typically frame education stories, and thereby under what

logic do members of the public understand topics in education? The 2012 FrameWorks

report, *Overarching Patterns in Media Coverage of Education Issues*, authored by Moira

O'Neil (2012), provides some insight into common frames. First, consumer logic plays

heavily into how stories are crafted; for example, education is framed as a product,

students and parents as consumers, and education systems should thus be subject to

market logic (O'Neil, 2012). Further, O'Neil (2012) found that stories typically portray

learning spaces and policymaking spaces as separate, which may also lead to the fact that

stories are overwhelmingly about crises and problems, and less so about solutions.

Another way to conceptualize the framing of stories, as discussed in the standardized

testing example presented above, is to distinguish between event-based reporting and

accountability reporting. In other words, is a story related to an event that includes a

photo opportunity of some sort, such as the opening of a new school, or is it connected to

the thought that the press has a role in holding schools accountable in the public eye, such

as through the publication of test scores?

Education leaders and journalists are set up to work in at least a semi-symbiotic relationship. This can be limiting in multiple ways. If a reporter cultivates a relationship with a source in policymaking, they may fail to report from a diversity of viewpoints. On the flip side, a policymaker may shape their narrative specifically for those reporters. As Michelle Stack's (2007) study of education reporting in British Columbia evidenced, "many of these policy-makers spoke of the five journalists as people who were in the back of their mind when they were thinking about policy or media strategy" (p. 251). The recursive nature of this relationship – that policymakers are shaping or spinning their message based on the ways in which they see and believe journalists will report on their work – adds a layer of policy mediation that has little to do with the way in which policies are intended to be enacted within schools. How media thus transforms policy is an area ripe for further investigation.

One study of the way in which 'spin' influences the implementation of policy comes from England, where the development of English Education Action Zones – a short-lived government initiative – was found by authors Gewirtz, Dickson & Power (2004) to be quite dominated by the press narrative surrounding their introduction. They noted "spin was often raised explicitly by those we interviewed as an activity that they needed to be reflexive about and engage in. It was described as shaping the fortunes of policy or, in some cases, as constituting the policy" (Gewirtz et al., 2004, p. 322). Particularly interesting in light of the way No Child Left Behind – and the Obama Administration's Race To The Top initiative – require public reporting of testing data and school rankings, is Gewirtz, Dickson & Power's (2004) conclusion that spin can in fact be constitutive. As they write, the constitutive role of spin means:

> Spin is not simply 'done to' a policy, but is also something which 'makes
>
> up' a policy. A key example here is that certain policies require the
>
> demonstration of progress and success and that this in itself becomes an
>
> intrinsic feature of the policies rather than something outside of them.
>
> (Gewirtz et al., 2004, p. 327)

Indeed, as states adopt accountability models to stay in compliance with federal

regulations, states must rank order schools based on a metric of performance. In turn,

when a school thus is presented in the newspaper as ranking high or low – or higher or

lower than the year before, or in comparison to surrounding or comparable school

districts – their school administrators are in the unenviable position of spinning the

results of this ranking, and of explaining to their constituents why it appears their

students are performing well or poorly. Again, this is likely to be framed in a conflict-

oriented stance – and particularly for school districts that do not fare well in rankings, is

likely to generate press coverage, as it is unlikely to be a positive story.

As discussed earlier, contemporary discourse surrounding education policy is not

exempt from broad political trends of neoliberalism and market-based logic, which, as in

the Wallace (1993) case, makes schooling akin to a pawn in a game, one in which

"members of both main political parties have simplified and polarized the debate to

realize their own interests" (p. 334). This, too, invokes Bourdieu's (2005) social fields

theory, in that mass media "plays an active role in supporting the excessive power held

by the economic and political elites" (Tamir & Davidson, 2011, p. 236). As Eran Tamir

and Roei Davidson (2011) explain in their analysis of news coverage of education reform

in New Jersey, "Media embraces the symbolic capital held by the state and corporate

sector and tends to accept these agents' opinions as a legitimate objective standpoint, while marginalizing the ideas voiced by professionals and intellectuals" (p. 236). Thus, certain sources are privileged over others – both for quotations and for the way in which they are protected from criticism. As their case study reveals, the New Jersey press avoided framing the governor in a negative light amidst changes to the state's teacher licensure program (Tamir & Davidson, 2011). For the purposes of cultivating a relationship of open access to the governor's office, it makes perfect sense to frame the conflict in such a manner that she or he is clear of it – again, a balance between access and accountability. However, because of the media tendency to frame stories within a discourse of conflict, this then requires setting up the sides of the debate as occurring between other policy actors. Indeed, as Béland (2005) argues, the "political arena is a structured arena of conflict in which ideological frames form 'weapons of mass persuasion' related to existing social and institutional forces," and in which "political actors must master the institutional 'rules of the game' while manipulating the symbols available in existing ideological repertoires" (p. 12).

Increasingly, those other actors are not educators, parents, or elected officials, but a new class of experts – policy entrepreneurs. Policy entrepreneurs "encourage practice communities to pay attention to certain problems," and "promote particular policy prescriptions," and in so doing, these policy intermediaries build "the causal beliefs that constitute the cognitive basis of programmatic ideas, packaging [them] in a way that makes them appealing to a range of audiences" (Verger, 2012, p. 111). Policy entrepreneurs can thus play a significant role in framing policies, and because their job is deliberately to push agendas and their position is not typically restricted by their

positionality as public officials, they are not just free to speak with journalists, they are

encouraged to do so.

As Stack's (2007) study of education journalists in British Columbia reveals, in

order to be considered good stories, those dealing with education topics "had to fit within

a dramaturgical format" (p. 252), because, as the reporters said in their interviews, the

media simply does not cover "good" news. Using Bourdieu's logic of practice and

habitus, she found that the common sense logic that rules education coverage is the

"construction of common sense within the framework of objectivity, fairness, and

balance" (Stack, 2007, p. 252). This "common sense" stands in stark contrast to the way

in which Max Weber described Polish journalists, who "conceived it as part of their role

to shape policy and solve social problems" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 39). On balance,

as Hallin & Mancini (2004) point out:

> No serious media analyst would argue that journalism anywhere in the
>
> world is literally neutral…News incorporates political values, which arise
>
> from a range of influences, from routines of information gathering to
>
> recruitment patterns of journalists and shared ideological assumptions of
>
> the wider society. (p. 26)

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the majority of reporting tends to be event-based, in

that a story is prompted by an event, incident, or at the very least, press release. One of

Stack's (2007) interviewees, for example, cited a study indicating that "90-95% of what

the media report is event-driven, demonstrating that journalists do not choose stories but

that 'they just happen'" (p. 254). This logic, however, obscures the fact that journalists

and editors are still working together to decide what makes a newsworthy story – and that

coverage is then shaped by their interpretation of what is and is not worth reporting

(Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Indeed, as Gerstl-Pepin (2002) asserts,

> The media are a political player in determining how educational issues
>
> will be represented, how much airtime candidates will be given, and
>
> whether they will even be covered at all. Reporters, producers, and editors
>
> make daily decisions about who to select to interview and what viewpoints
>
> to represent. Given the tremendous power they have in the choices they
>
> make, as a group they form a discrete political institution. (p. 42)

Indeed, the press is routinely viewed as transmitters of information to the public, and with

the exception of the editorial page, rarely is their status as political players put under

scrutiny or recognized for its power.[9]

In their analysis of education reporting, Tamir & Davidson (2011) classify stories

as falling under one of two basic frames: thematic or episodic. They explain:

> Thematic frames drive the audience to attribute responsibility for social
>
> problems to institutional actors (e.g., governmental actors, professional
>
> groups, unions) and to conflicts over interests and power, while episodic
>
> frames focus on specific 'juicy' examples to illustrate a larger problem,
>
> frequently leading the audience to blame individuals for social ills…By
>
> focusing on such individual actors or instances, episodic frames serve to
>
> insulate powerful political actors from the public and thus help cement the
>
> dominant position of these actors. (Tamir & Davidson, 2011, p. 237)

While it could be argued that crafting education policy stories in an episodic frame

simply makes for a more interesting story in that it puts a face to a policy, it is important

to note what is obscured, omitted, or oversimplified in this process. Tamir & Davidson (2011) go on to explain that, due to the commercial nature of journalism in the United States, "this emphasis on individuals is often transformed into a focus on conflict between individuals…In fact, there is some evidence that the media can cultivate organizational conflict where none previously existed" (p. 238). Again, the recursive nature of policy shaped by reporting is interesting in this case. If the press frames a debate as happening between two policy actors, there are consequently other sides to the story that become less important – potentially to the point that they are forgotten. As policy then transforms into practice, elements that may have been critical in the design but are not part of the media's framing could have damaging effects on the implementation of policy initiatives. Indeed, as Diane Ravitch (2011) wrote in *The death and life of the Great American School System*, her intentions of improving schooling for all students through standardization were completely transformed as policy was turned into practice, causing her to rescind her support of the law she helped to craft. Indeed, as policy is transformed by the realities of implementation in practice, the ability of the press to "see" the effects of the policy – and the speed at which these results may be seen – can ultimately determine the perceived success or failure of a policy change (Cuban, 1998; Gandara, 2000).

Yet another influential factor in the framing of education coverage is the personal history that reporters bring to their reporting. It is a common aphorism, repeated derisively in the world of teachers and others who work in education policy and scholarship, that everyone knows how education should work because everyone was a student once. For teachers especially, this is a particularly biting statement, akin to the

similar aphorism that "those who can, do, and those who can't, teach." The position of

the journalist figures heavily into Stack's (2007) analysis of common sense logic. Not

only do the reporters she interviewed cite their own experiences as children in the

educational system, but also report being heavily influenced by having children of their

own in the school system. One reporter in particular explains the source relationship he

was able to cultivate with staff at his daughter's school:

> Paul, a senior television reporter and political commentator for a large
>
> conglomerate, pitched more education stories when he had children in
>
> school. He recalled being more attuned to and interested in educational
>
> issues. His daughter's predominantly middle class school was central to
>
> his province-wide TV station's coverage of educational issues…Paul
>
> overtly scripted students to create news. After a mild earthquake he called
>
> a teacher at his daughter's school who confirmed that they had felt the
>
> earthquake; he then immediately went to the school and asked them to re-
>
> enact diving under the desks…Paul's story was a performance on many
>
> levels. The mainstream was represented through one middle to upper class
>
> school in the province's capital…personal relationships facilitated rapid
>
> access. (Stack, 2007, p. 253)

This example illustrates a fundamental problem in the crafting of stories, particularly the

episodic ones, in that the means by which reporters find their sources is deeply impacted

by their own identity and the networks in which they are comfortable operating (Stack,

2007). Indeed, Paul himself posits that "reporters are probably more charitable to people

they know," and went on to define his audience as mainstream, which he defined "as

neither destitute nor exceptionally wealthy" (Stack, 2007, p. 253). Again, this is an area in which journalists exercise a great deal of power in shaping the discourse, by choosing which individual sources they identify to represent schools, students, teachers, or policy actors more generally.

Rhetoric impacts educational reporting as well, because journalists work both to effectively communicate policy and to tell a good story. However, as policy is explained, there is ample room for its misinterpretation through the use of rhetoric that simplifies concepts. Wallace (1993), in his case study on progressive education and the role the mass media played in shaping the discourse about its implementation, pointed out that "the recommendations contained in the Plowden Report were considerably more sophisticated that the rhetoric itself" (p. 325). Indeed, this example highlights the power of rhetoric and word choice in and of itself. Words such as "progressive" have deep meaning within education theory, and yet mean something quite different in the context of political reporting. It is thus critical for education reporters to have the resources necessary to check what implications they may be making as they choose words.

Chapter 6: What skills should an education reporter have?

As was established in this paper's introduction, education policy is a complex topic. Certainly, many arenas of public policy are incredibly complex, and in each one, there is an interface between the media, the public sector, and the private sector in communicating that complexity with the public. There are, however, a few ways in which education reporting is different. Almost everyone in this country has some sort of

interface with education, yet degrees of expertise, depth of contact, and preconceptions based on personal experience vary widely. As Cohen (2010) writes, "Most consumers of news media are not directly involved in the daily work of education," but were at one time students, and therefore "likely carry strong memories, negative or positive" (p. 106) of their experiences in school. In addressing the deficits in education reporting, it is informative to establish what sorts of skills might behoove a reporter covering education topics.

One means by which education reporting could be improved is by a concentrated effort on the part of the hiring staff at media outlets to focus on recruiting and retaining reporters with specialized knowledge in the realm of education policy. Naturally, a newspaper would be well-served by hiring someone on their education beat with a background in local, state, and federal politics and policy, the ability to analyze and explain a budget, an understanding of statistics and how they can be manipulated, a knack for interacting with children, and a broad view of intersecting policy realms such as health care, agriculture, transportation, housing, and labor policies. Such a person probably does not exist. In all likelihood, a local city paper would be lucky to have the budget to hire a dedicated education reporter at all. However, as newspapers hire reporters – or as journalists covering education work to improve their reporting – there are a few key areas in which specialized skills are of utmost importance.

The Education Writers Association (http://www.ewa.org/about-ewa), a professional organization for journalists who cover education topics, serves as a national clearinghouse for information on education reporting (EWA, 2013). In its guidebook on standards and ethics for education reporting, it outlines necessary skill sets and provides a

baseline overview of the scope of subjects with which an education reporter ought to be familiar (Carr, 2013). Fundamentally, the EWA claims, "Education journalists have always needed to know how to evaluate schools based on both qualitative and quantitative measures, how to interview children effectively, and how to analyze a budget" (Carr, 2013, p. 1). These skills alone are insufficient, however, in particular in relation to federal trends in accountability reporting. In recent years, there has been increasing reliance on reporting education statistics, as standardized testing, teacher performance, and school ranking measures have become the dominant rhetoric of federal policy.

How does emphasis on quantitative data mesh with reporters' training? Or, put differently, how many aspiring journalists enter the field because of a strong desire to work with numbers, spreadsheets, and statistical analysis, versus those who enter the field because they want to tell stories? Unfortunately for those who do not have a natural affinity for data, the reality of the contemporary education landscape requires them to adapt, particularly if they are to provide a thorough explanation of statistics to the public. As education reporting scholar LynNell Hancock (2005, p. 22) writes, "to avoid the trap of oversimplification, reporters need a working knowledge of everything from psychometrics to education theory in order to untangle where the numbers end and the truth begins" (p. 22). John Clark, a retired policy analyst from the Nebraska Department of Education, described the following scenario as an example of the danger of oversimplification:

> The two leading newspapers in Nebraska typically include graphics
> accompanying the release of results on state tests. There are numerous

demographic data elements that could be included in a chart of scores –

from race/ethnicity to free-and-reduced lunch counts to mobility rates –

and as journalists decide which elements are included in a chart of results,

they have the ability to show correlation by association. However, while

free-and-reduced lunch numbers provide a simple measure of the relative

poverty of a school, the measure of mobility – what percentage of your

student population turns over from the start to the end of the school year –

is more complex. It raises the question of when the test is administered,

and therefore, which children a given school is being held accountable for

testing. (J. Clark, personal interview, March 18, 2014)

As Clark points out, behind every statistic, there is a deeper story – one that might not be

readily apparent to someone without a policy background. Again, this is asking for quite

a lot of knowledge from someone with a degree in journalism, which could lead to two

equally troubling scenarios. On the one hand, the reporter could rely on official sources to

interpret information for them, thereby ceding control of the narrative and allowing

officials to spin the results. On the other, the reporter could decide to align statistics

without context, leaving the public to make inferences from the data that fail to take into

account the human angle behind the numbers.

The Education Writers Association guide leaves unanswered another substantial

question – where do reporters learn these skills? Statistics in *The American Journalist in*

the 21ˢᵗ Century indicate the general lack of higher education required for those entering

the journalism profession at all, let alone specialized knowledge for covering a topic such

as education (Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2007). A cursory search of

college journalism programs indicates that they are unlikely to devote significant resources to such specialization, even at the graduate level.[10] If reporters do not learn these skills in college, it becomes imperative that they are provided with resources to do so once on the job. Indeed, especially in light of the rise in prominence of statisticians like Nate Silver applying data analysis to push for data-driven decision making in all arenas, it is of utmost importance for journalists to take on careful dissections of the impacts of such decisions in complex human fields such as education (Goldenberg, 2013).

Rather than approaching education reporting as under the purview of just one person, some large newspapers have reimagined the way they structure reporting on the education beat. As Hancock (2005) explains, "a few news organizations, like the Baltimore *Sun*, are responding to the changes wrought by the federal act by redesigning the education beat as an investigative challenge" (p. 25) Others, such as the Chicago *Tribune,* are reallocating staff to work together to cover the education beat, which as of Hancock's (2005) report had five reporters covering a district with circa 400,000 students (p. 25). Indeed, assigning several reporters to cover a complex topic such as the interface of federal testing policy under No Child Left Behind – and its concurrent effects on the decisions state education agencies must make in developing accountability models in addition to the decisions local districts must make in curriculum and instruction – with the more episodic human stories of how individual students from diverse backgrounds are impacted by testing would seem to be the only way to ensure coverage of the topic was thorough enough to make (a sufficient amount of) the nuances of the policy understandable to the general public. Again, Hancock (2005) asserts that "assessing the

meaning and validity of such tests [under NCLB] requires a pool of sophisticated reporters who can navigate the world of statistics, business, human development, teaching and learning methods, neuroscience, politics, race, and culture" (p. 25). Conversely to the *Sun* and the *Tribune*, however, "*The New York Times* deploys just three writers to cover a local school system more than twice the size of Chicago's," and, "most papers…like *The Houston Chronicle,* have undergone cutbacks, leaving their education reporter, if they even have one, with little time for much more than chasing the latest press release" (Hancock, 2005, p. 25). And if reporters are relying on press releases from government agencies or district officials to tell the story, returning to Tamir & Davidson (2011), they will tend to frame their coverage in ways that favor the social, political, or economic elite. And, as one of Stack's (2007) interviewees adds, "the nature of contact with government has changed from direct access to politicians to 'flacks' or communications people," and that while "bureaucrats provided the bulk of the source information" (p. 256) for stories, they were rarely quoted.

Reporters also face unique challenges in working with children. Learning to ask questions that will effectively elicit answers from a seven-year-old is quite different from interviewing an adult. As the EWA guide suggests, beginning education reporters can learn techniques from watching veteran journalists interview children, and likens the process of interviewing children as much of an art as it is a skill (Carr, 2013). For reporters that use cameras, an additional challenge is negotiating what is coded as acceptable imagery in journalism (i.e. subjects not being staged, not looking into the camera) with the reality that children are attracted to cameras, and more often than not, trained by their parents to look into the lens and smile. As Wallace (1993) writes, "It

seems that the normal procedures of media professionals put [school] staff at a

disadvantage…What was a unique experience for the staff was probably a routine

assignment for the television programme team" (p. 332). Indeed, introducing cameras

into a classroom can be a monstrous distraction, which immediately brings questions of

objectivity and natural portrayal of events into question.[11]

Finally, there is a deeply troubling trend in media and politics that is of utmost

importance for those working in education to keep in mind. As reporting staffs shrink and

news desks become more reliant on easily produced content, organizations wishing to

influence public opinion through media have found increasingly effective ways of

advertising to the public under the guise of news stories. So-called sponsored content,

which is prevalent in online journalism but is increasingly used by established print and

broadcast outlets, is a means by which companies or think tanks work with advertising

and marketing agencies to produce packaged news stories that appear in print as though

they were written by journalists (Finnegan, 2014).[12] Not only is this pre-produced content

easy to integrate into a newspaper's coverage, but a reporter without specialized training

in education may find it much easier to access the content in a white paper from a think

tank than to interpret the information from academic research – if they are even aware of

where academic education research can be found (Levin et al., 2013).

As numerous educational foundations with deep pockets, such as (perhaps most

famously) the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, are investing heavily in charter school

movements and education reform more generally, it is critical for the public to be made

aware of the political and financial origins driving the media discourse (Berliner & Glass,

2014; Wells et al., 2002). The sponsored content strategy was even employed by the

Bush Administration to manage of No Child Left Behind's public image, as the federal

Department of Education conducted a study analyzing press coverage of the law and then

used the findings to generate "video news releases" – pre-packaged news stories that

were "designed to be indistinguishable from the news segments broadcast to the public"

(Goldstein, 2011, p. 544). It may be easy for a media outlet to integrate such content into

the rest of their news coverage, but if the public is not aware of its origins, it becomes

quite problematic that it is positioned as meeting the same standards of journalistic

integrity as content generated by reporters themselves.

Chapter 7: Why should we care? What's at stake?

Why is it so important for the news media to provide this coverage? Most

importantly, "education policy engages people across social contexts, whether as

educators, parents, students, taxpayers, voters, or consumers of news and popular media"

(Cohen, 2010, p. 106). Could it not fall on school districts or state education agencies to

provide this information, as they do on their websites and in the publications they

circulate to households in their districts? Or, as the title of this thesis suggests, ought we

rely on students to report to us on what is happening in schools? Clearly, coverage

originating from districts could be spun to portray the schools in that attendance area in a

positive light, and a state agency would be constrained by the need to maintain a

seemingly balanced and unbiased broad perspective of school districts statewide – while

simultaneously protecting the position of being an intermediary between federal and local

policies, not to mention state-level lawmakers. And relying on children to report on the

goings-on at school, while full of potential for enriching coverage, is not a solution to the

entirety of this extant gap in information. Most importantly, as Wallace (1993) writes, "the press and broadcasting are the main sources of information about political affairs for the population at large. Awareness of central government education policies among most members of the public is based on media coverage" (p. 322). Further, the education community itself uses media coverage as a go-between from different levels of policy, scholarship, and advocacy to keep abreast of work in other sectors of this broad range of issues. Wallace (1993) adds that "the media inform public opinion about the educational concerns and policies of central government politicians and, reciprocally, inform politicians about public perceptions of existing policies or the need for changes" (p. 322). And contrary to contemporary emphases on purported balanced coverage, "journalists in some systems, and some historical periods, retain more of the 'publicist' role that once prevailed in political journalism – that is, an orientation toward influencing public opinion" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 28). Indeed, it could be argued that in a political climate in which education policy is being used as a political tool of party agendas, it is more important than ever before that media coverage serves to educate communities and parents about the ramifications of policy proposals on children in schools.

In a news climate in which much reporting is driven by campaign cycles, the media "at best, represent shallow depictions of educational issues, which tend to be tightly controlled by how candidates define educational problems. These representations of education in the media tend to reinforce and reflect public assumptions that America's educational system is failing" (Gerstl-Pepin, 2002, p. 37). Despite common complaints from the public about the endless churn and drone of the cable news cycle, though, journalistic organizations are slow to change long-established patterns in they way they

frame and report stories. As Bennett (1996) surmises, the unofficial rules by which journalistic organizations determine coverage explain "how a news product that is so widely criticized by citizens, politicians, scholars, and even journalists themselves, is so resistant to conscious, goal-directed change, at least of the sort that would improve democratic communication" (p. 383). It is possible that the impact of changes in technology and the onset of new media published solely online have yet to be fully realized (Maratea, 2008).

In order for substantive improvement in education reporting to occur, patterns in the training and established patterns of work for beat reporters would have to be confronted and modified. As established above, however, it is both challenging and unlikely that colleges of journalism or local news outlets will have the resources and wherewithal to be the sole investors in cultivating experienced education reporters. Therefore, it is imperative that we look to multiple potential avenues of redress if we seek to improve education coverage.

Conclusions and Avenues for Redress

As is evidenced by the substantial preface and literature review, the intersection of mass media and education policy is a subject that is ripe for further study prior to the formal proposal of policy changes, and that the establishment of something akin to an educational ombudsperson (see Appendix A), while not unprecedented, would require careful consideration in terms of its structuring. In light of this, it is also interesting to look to system-wide changes prompted by the influx of new media and its concurrent

diminishment of the traditional gatekeeping role of the press (Williams & Carpini, 2004). In some markets, alternative, online news sources have stepped in to address a lack of in-depth coverage. In particular, Gotham Schools (which has recently become Chalkbeat, as it expands beyond New York City) has been an independent source of education coverage of New York City public schools since 2008, and its status as an independent non-profit organization focused on education positions it to concentrate specifically on in-depth education coverage by experts in the field of journalism and education ("Chalkbeat," 2014). Indeed, scholars such as Ray Maratea (2008) have argued that that arenas such as the blogosphere have opened up new avenues by which the public can engage with complex social problems in more democratic forms of discussion. What is limiting in this model, however, is the fact that web-based reporting or blogging is unlikely to meet the same diverse volume of readers as a traditional daily paper or broadcast source. (See Appendix C for further thoughts regarding my intentions to engage with media production outside of mainstream media outlets.)

In Canada, the Toronto-based group Facts in Education (FiE), described as "a non-partisan panel of experts," was established "to correct significant factual errors about education in various media sources across Canada, and to create wide awareness of the correct information" (Levin et al., 2013, p. 1). (See Appendix A for a description of its establishment.) However, the scope of FiE's work is limited in that their purpose "is to correct factual errors only," and the experts do not "seek to challenge opinions expressed in the news media" (Levin et al., 2013, p. 1). While this is certainly a step in the right direction, it does not address some of the deeper issues in the way stories are framed and

chosen in the first place, nor does it address the imbalances in representation established in the preceding chapters.

There are distinct benefits to qualitative stories in making the goings-on of schooling relevant to a broader audience. In this arena, student participation in the process of storytelling could meet the needs of providing insight on schooling and the effects of education policy as translated into practice while recognizing the limits faced by traditional journalists in conducting long-form, embedded reporting on student stories. Further, engaging students in the process of reporting their school experience serves a curricular purpose, too (Apple & Beane, 2007; Charmaraman, 2011; Gayeski, 1981; Goodman, 2003; Soep, 2006). Students who are engaged in the work of producing stories about their schooling are likely to serve as invaluable reporters on their educational experiences, extending the perhaps innocuous question of "What did you learn in school today?" into a charge for school improvement better designed to meet the needs of students (See Appendix B for analysis on my own work in documentary production with students.)

Needless to say, there is both a demonstrable need for additional resources for reporters and a problem diagnosis that indicates sufficient demand to merit its consideration for the betterment of democracy. Further, as a relatively unresearched field – particularly in the United States – it is one that merits additional qualitative and quantitative research (Cohen, 2010). In particular, qualitative research on the ways in which journalists come to define themselves as education reporters and the means by which they gather knowledge and expertise would provide helpful insight into how an ombudsperson, policy analyst or research scholar might best be situated. Quantitative

research regarding how media organizations allocate personnel and funding to education

reporting would be similarly beneficial in addressing the need for outside resources. As

there is seemingly no end to the increasing complexity of education policy, it will grow

ever more important for the fourth estate to fulfill its duty in informing the public of a

matter so fundamentally important to the future of this country.

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[1] Kozol, the author of numerous books on decaying and neglected urban public schools, inspired my early forays into learning about education policy as an undergraduate. As an emerging documentary filmmaker, I was struck by his ability to communicate the ways in which the system was failing so many children, told with so much emotion and in such clear language. Much like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, however, I believe that Kozol's writing tears at the heartstrings with its pathos, potentially at the cost of an effective argument for change.

[2] I have included three other pieces influencing the development of this thesis. Appendix B, which is excerpted from a longer paper, is a retrospective self-study on the value of ethnography and student participation in education storytelling. Appendix C stems from a developing proposal to establish a public media resource center centered on education issues. Appendix D is excerpted from a multimodal discourse analysis of media coverage of a proposed piece of legislation establishing charter schools in Nebraska.

[3] For the purposes of this example – and in dominant focus in this paper – I use local newspapers and print media in general, which is not to say that many of the same trends and influences are in play in broadcast (i.e. television and radio). Part of the logic in this is an emergent tendency for print media to be more share-able in the online, social media environment. There are also differences in these forms of media, not to mention the fact that it is also mostly beyond the purview of my analysis to examine the influence of purely online media. Again, these are all areas ripe for further investigation and analysis.

[4] As Cohen explains, "The social language of Accountability is characterized by a report-like structure that aligns it with institutional authority. Grammar features associated with institutional language, such as a technical vocabulary, and statistics (Mehan, 1993, p. 264), pattern together to locate knowledge and authority about education within institutions involved in educational oversight, but external to the schools themselves. Knowledge claims are grounded in quantifiable, generalized data such as statistics. Gee argues that the grammar patterns of a social language tell us what that language is 'about' (1999, p. 27). In other words, social languages tell a story in which certain actors and actions are foregrounded as relevant and important. We can see this in the grammar of Accountability, which frequently indexes institutions such as state governmental organizations and schools, and often places them in subject position in the article's sentences. When this pattern combines with lexical choices for verbs that position people as the objects of institutional actions, the overall effect is to foreground institutional processes over individual actions, distancing those most directly engaged in the daily

social practices of formal education from authoritative knowledge about teaching and learning," (2010, p. 110).

[5] The notion of "common sense" – that something becomes accepted as the default logic, will be further discussed below.

[6] Pub.L. 93-380, Title V § 513, Aug 21, 1974, 88 Stat. 57

[7] As the Education Writers Association's *Standards & Ethics* Reporter's Guide points out, this too is a domain of law with which reporters must familiarize themselves. Under a section entitled "Know Open Meetings & Public Records Laws," the guide states that "Education journalists should familiarize themselves with relevant open meetings laws so they will know if – and when – a school board, charter school board, or state board of education might be in violation. They should also know which types of documents and records are available to the public (school employee names and salary levels, for instance) and which ones are not (individual student report cards or discipline records, for instance). And they must know how, and when, to file an open records request," (Carr, 2013, p. 1).

[8] The case of Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist. dealt with the right of students in schools to freedom of expression, in this case, whether students were allowed to wear black armbands to protest the Vietnam War. The Court found that under the First Amendment, students did not sacrifice their right to freedom of expression within school, so long as their expression did not cause significant disruption to the school or infringing upon the rights of others. (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist.,* 1969).

[9] The major exception to this is the rise of cable news outlets with distinct partisan orientations, such as Fox News and MSNBC. Major national newspapers, too, can be cited as having a partisan bent, particularly in their editorial pages. Locally, however, when there is little to no competition between papers or networks, the political status of a media outlet is likely less questioned.

[10] A Google search performed December 2, 2013, using search terms connecting education, reporting, journalism, and college of journalism led to one grant program at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism related to a fellowship for aspiring education reporters. A further search of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications website subgroups produced no results for a special interest group for education reporting. While neither of these searches are conclusive evidence that colleges of journalism do not provide specialized coursework in education issues, they are a strong indication that teaching aspiring journalists skills for covering education issues is not *de rigeur* in most programs.

[11] In this, the author speaks from personal experience. As a photographer and videographer working for the Nebraska Department of Education, I was frequently asked to enter schools and classrooms with camera equipment. Children were drawn as if by magnets to my gear. It would regularly take several minutes to get the majority of students to entertain the possibility they could ignore the camera and return to paying attention to their teachers or the goings-on of classroom life as if there were no camera present. I had a natural affinity, because of a prior background in working with children, in negotiating this situation. A camera operator from a television affiliate, or a

photojournalist from a newspaper or magazine, is not necessarily so inclined. Furthermore, this distraction for the students is simultaneously also a deep disruption for the teacher, who is more acculturated to being the only adult present in the room. Dan Lortie's (1975) *Schoolteacher* might provide interesting insight in the relative social position of journalists versus teachers in this instance.

[12] The website Churnalism (http://churnalism.sunlightfoundation.com/about/) is a resource for those interested in comparing news stories with press releases from special interest organizations. Built to use search engine technology much like similar programs that check academic writing for plagiarism, Churnalism runs the text from a user-provided URL against databases of content from press releases (Sunlight Foundation, 2014).

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APPENDIX A: ESTABLISHING AN EDUCATIONAL OMBUDSPERSON

This section originally appeared as a policy proposal in response to the lack of robust coverage of education in the mass media. It delineates one sort of specialist that might serve as something akin to a licensed education policy analyst, particularly in a state context. In order to address both the need for more robust coverage and the accompanying need for more robust resources for media, this paper proposed the formation of a new entity – an Educational Ombudsperson – to fill the gaps in information that limit the public's understanding of education policy.

The reporter guides developed by the Education Writers Association provide an excellent baseline of information about skills education reporters ought to possess, and the broad swath of topics they should understand. And yet, these guidelines do nothing to address the fact that many education reporters likely have little in the way of data analysts at their disposal, nor are they likely to have the time to stay abreast of all corners of the jargon-rich and disparate field of policy. Further, particularly in the state of Nebraska – a state known for eschewing many federal trends in education policy in favor of adopting its own homegrown models – it is imperative that reporters have locally specific knowledge and policy interpretation at their disposal. Thus, the establishment of an Ombudsperson of Education, to be created as either state-level or regional position, is hereby presented as a proposed method for increasing and improving coverage of education issues. While there are numerous ways in which such an office could exist, a

few existing or similar models are perhaps most suited to serving the needs outlined in

this paper, which shall be discussed in light of theoretical implementation within the state

of Nebraska.[13] After a discussion of the rationale for such an entity to exist, I propose

three potential methods for its establishment: through legislation creating a state-level

office allocated general fund dollars for its operations, through contracting with regional

education research laboratories to staff a dedicated researcher and interpreter of policy

specifically to serve as a resource for journalists and source of information for the public,

or through the creation of a research and information office affiliated with the University

system.

What is lacking is help for writers and reporters to understand the policies being

introduced and implemented at federal, state and local levels, without a policy interpreter

presenting the view of the policy, data set, or report with a particular political slant.

Furthermore, instead of just presenting an argument in a binary, it would be beneficial for

journalists to be able to be presented with a synopsis of all – or at least many – of the

perspectives on a given topic. An independent resource established to serve the

informational needs of the public would not have the same barriers to access and need for

commensurate symbolic capital that challenge independent journalists attempting to

access traditional resources.

The establishment of such an office is not without precedent. In 2013, Illinois

State Senator Michael Noland introduced a bill, SB 1622, which would have created an

Office of the Education Ombudsman, in this case proposed as an office within the office

of the Governor (Noland, 2013). Though the bill failed on a vote of 22-26, mostly due to

the fiscal note attached, the way in which the office was formulated is of considerable

interest for its application in other states ("IL S. Tran. 2013 Reg. Sess. No. 39," 2013).

Senator Noland's bill would have established a network of offices statewide, and

specifically aimed to house these as separate from Illinois's regional education offices,

which the senator claimed were too closely tied to the work of the school districts in their

regions to be independent and objective ("IL S. Tran. 2013 Reg. Sess. No. 39," 2013).

However, housing such an office under the purview of the Governor is problematic as

well, not only because of the political interests and pressures that serving under a

governor imply, but also due to the fact that, as explained above, this could result in

coverage that protects the interests of the elite if they are associated with the access to

information. In the District of Columbia, an Educational Ombudsman was established as

a member of the Mayor's Office, which leads to the same set of constraints to objectivity

(*DC ST § 38-351. Office of Ombudsman; establishment, term.*, 2007).

The first means by which the need for a public information officer or

ombudsperson of education could be met would be through the establishment of an

independent agent within state government. In a conversation with Nebraska's Speaker of

the Legislature, Senator Greg Adams – himself a former Social Studies teacher and

former Education Committee chair – the senator suggested that there is a real need for a

resource at the state level to do a better job of communicating education policy and

debates about education topics to the general public (G. Adams, personal interview,

December 2, 2013). While he suggested the potential that this responsibility fall on the

State Department of Education, he noted their already limited resources in executing their

statutory functions. More importantly, though, if this office were housed within the state

education agency, the employee executing the functions of this office would have a

significant challenge in effectively providing unbiased information regarding the state agency's role in policy matters.[14] Therefore, it would be better to keep this entity independent of the state agency – in line with ombudsmen overseeing other agencies of government, such as health and human services. If this route is to be pursued, it would behoove those crafting legislation to look for alternate means for housing such an office – within the state's library, perhaps.[15] It could also be established within a larger auditor's or government accountability office.

The second option for locating such a resource would be to house an ombudsperson within the existing network of regional educational research laboratories (RELs). The federal government funds a network of ten laboratories nationwide that "work in partnership with school districts, state departments of education, and others to use data and research to improve academic outcomes for students. Fundamentally, the mission of the RELs is to provide support for a more evidence-reliant education system" (Institute for Education Sciences, 2013). These entities, which function similarly to the Cooperative Agricultural Extension Offices managed by the University, are charged with conducting independent research and providing resources for education policymakers. The primary limitations of introducing this proposed office within the RELs are twofold. First, because RELs are geared toward serving policymakers, their extant work tends to operate within the same discourse of education policy language that is inaccessible to the general public. While the creation of a public- and journalist-serving ombudsperson would be directed specifically to combat this, it would nevertheless be challenging to operate within such a different discourse of functionality. Second, RELs tend to cover multiple states, which could be both a benefit and a drawback. It would mean that the

ombudsperson would need to learn the nuances of policy and regional specificity in multiple states, which would be a difficult task. However, as a benefit from a funding perspective, this would mean that the cost could be shared across the region, thereby mitigating the financial impact on any one state.

The third option for establishing an independent resource for educational information would be to house it within the University system, much like either the Cooperative Agricultural Extension Offices or the Public Policy Center.[16] This would be similar to Canada's Facts in Education, which was founded as such:

> FiE is the creation of Professor Ben Levin of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto and is run by two OISE graduate students who work as project coordinators. It is a non-partisan panel of experts, working to correct significant factual errors about education in various media sources across Canada, and to create wide awareness of the correct information. The purpose of FiE is to correct factual errors only, and does not seek to challenge opinions expressed in the news media. But while the panel does not take issue with the expression of opinion, it does aim to address articles that are inconsistent with the available research evidence. Ultimately, the objective of FiE's efforts is to contribute to bridging the gap between research and policy. The Facts in Education panel consists of 20 distinguished Canadian education experts, most of whom are either prominent researchers or former heads of significant educational organizations. (Levin et al., 2013, p. 14)

The clearest benefit to this model would be the opportunity for a more diverse array of

funding, not only through University resources, but also through the infrastructure the

University provides in securing grant funding. On balance, however, affiliating with the

University comes with its own set of drawbacks and restrictions, namely the introduction

of yet another wing of hierarchy and another elite entity whose interests would either

need to be protected or might be shielded from scrutiny for fear of losing access to

information. It could also be argued that affiliation with the University would situate this

office too deep into academia and its corresponding scholarly discourse, which would

work directly against its intent as a resource for better explaining policy, rather than

making it more obscure, specialized, or removed from public discourse.

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[13] As this research and proposal have taken shape, it has become evident to the author that it is an area ripe for further research, and potentially proposed legislation in the state of Nebraska. In its current form, this paper will address only a couple models, as it is beyond the scope of this analysis to cover more. Other alternatives are in their infancy in the author's research at the time of this writing.

[14] I say this as a former employee of the Nebraska Department of Education, which I mentioned in my conversation with Senator Adams. While it might be possible to have this ombudsman set up within the funding structure of the state education agency, it would be very difficult for this person, who would require accountability to someone, to remain objective about matters relating to the role of the state agency, the Commissioner of Education, or employees of the department. It could be done, theoretically, but it would not be easy.

[15] This is an idea that developed too late for adequate research at the time of this writing.

[16] According to the website for the Public Policy Center, they do not currently address research topics within education. (http://ppc.unl.edu/about)

APPENDIX B: A CASE FOR ETHNOGRAPHY: *WHEN WE STOP COUNTING*

"Through empowering high school students to document their own lives, we as producers were able to 'go' to places a production team would never reach, both physically and emotionally. Beyond that, the students were able to develop their own styles as producers of media with their newfound means of addressing the world. Members of a historically, linguistically, and socioeconomically marginalized community, they now had a megaphone at their disposal, to use as they saw fit." -Elisabeth Reinkordt, co-producer and director of *When We Stop Counting* (Meier & Reinkordt, 2010)

…

Author's note: The following is excerpted/adapted from a paper for Dr. Margaret Latta's doctoral seminar Curriculum as Aesthetic Text*, written in the fall of 2012. I include it here as both a case for journalistic reporting that is qualitative/feature-style rather than quantitative/event-based in nature as well as as a point of argument for future media production that engages students or the otherwise traditionally disempowered in the production of discourse on education.*

I often wonder how I would have approached the making of *When We Stop Counting* differently, now that I have started to think critically and academically about youth media production. I first met my graduate advisor, Ted Hamann, when I interviewed him for the film. Upon seeing early runs of vignettes in a presentation prior to the premiere, he asked if I had a graduate degree. And if I wanted one, since what I was presenting was, in his words, "qualitative ethnographic research." This was new

vocabulary for the product of an undergraduate education in semiotic theory and documentary production. Taking John Dewey's (2005) philosophy of a past/present/future, then, I can look to my recently past work in *When We Stop Counting* through the present lens of curriculum inquiry, aesthetics, and focused study in youth media production.

 …

 As young producers develop their skills, they develop their own styles of production as well. And by the very nature of their presence on the streets, carrying professional recording equipment, they are challenging assumptions about who has the power to make media, as cited in Steven Goodman's *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change* (2003, p. 53). The process of change from consumer to producer of media must address the codes of representation present in the advertising and pop culture media to which young people have been exposed. This is supported by Linda Charmaraman (2011), who writes that "mainstream media, which typically perpetuate dominant discourses and representations, can engineer and promote subjectively skewed images of such vulnerable communities as urban youth and minorities of color" (p. 102). She goes on to argue that "growing numbers of alternative youth media communities offer greater local access to all levels of media-making, giving voice to disadvantaged viewpoints and honoring the diversity inherent in local communities" (Charmaraman, 2011, p. 102).

 Goodman (2003) elaborates on the process of self-portrait documentary making taking place at the Educational Video Center (EVC), a student video production program in New York City, noting the difficulty arising as students grapple with their sense of

self. Describing the process of self-inquiry, he notes that "examining one's own conditions of daily life often turns 'givens' into questions or problems" (Goodman, 2003, p. 43). He adds:

> The EVC students seemed to be, as philosopher Maxine Greene described so well, 'sunk in the everydayness' of life. While they clearly felt the weight of the social order, they could not fully name or resist it. They felt conditioned, determined, even fated by prevailing circumstances, and so perceived the violence and inequity that surrounded them as wholly normal, as predictable as natural laws. (Goodman, 2003, p. 44)

He describes the student experience for many disadvantaged youth in terms of Dewey's (2005) notion of anesthetic experience, noting that the violence and struggle present in their experience "numbs [them] into an inability to imagine the existence of, much less search for, alternatives" (Goodman, 2003, p. 44). However, it is through the final stage of the production process – that of the public screening of student work – that the students are given "new opportunities to break the spell of the everydayness of life" (Goodman, 2003, p. 47).

The coupling of video production and public policy occurred early on in my undergraduate education. Frustrated with studying political science alone, I ran to the arts. I loved the new language associated with media theory, the deconstruction of the codes that existed all around me, the cheeky irreverence of post-modern critique. But that world alone did not hold enduring meaning for me. I felt the power of film to transform, to shake emotions to the core, to captivate an audience, and, ideally, to motivate it to action. It was this last piece that drove my return to the social sciences. I wanted to make

documentaries that conveyed human stories that could thereby illustrate the impact of public policy on real people. From the richness of the narrated human experience, I wanted people to understand their neighbors. The substance of my work is in the relations and interactions that are unfolding. It is a journey over varied terrain that has led me from the arts to politics to government to education to academia, but it inevitably circles back to the telling of stories.

…

In light of this thesis, I add the following: How do education stories best get told, and told in such a way that those in power to effect change hear them? Or, conversely, how do those who are not in power gain access to stories about policy such that it makes sense to them, and that they can thereby either develop an understanding for policy or discover means of enacting change from the grassroots?

APPENDIX C: MEDIA RESOURCE CENTER PROPOSAL

Impetus

Contemporary discourse surrounding public policy is characterized by the confluence of several factors. Three trends prevail in the domain of mass media. First, technological changes have prompted vast changes in media and press coverage, leading traditional mass media to justify a declining investment in in-depth reporting, closure or consolidation of local news outlets, and an increasing reliance on pre-fabricated content. In tension with these trends, the ease of communication through technology has led to an increase in so-called "citizen journalism," which both threatens the traditional media structure and presents significant ethical questions in methodology and yet challenges the hegemony of the fourth estate by empowering reporting that emerges from a non-dominant perspective. Second, as the investigative resources of the press dwindle in the face of market pressures, so too do market influences rush in to fill the void. Investment in public relations by the private sector has led to "sponsored content," a tactic in which companies provide news stories and articles about their product, presented as though they were original reporting being done by the journalistic entity. Third, cable news and the Internet have transformed societal expectations related to the consumption of news: content must be provided constantly, whether or not it is new or substantive. As it is expected it will be consumed in small pieces, the content becomes recursive and appears in sound bites, further limiting in-depth analysis.

The implications of this evolution in media converge with the world of education in multifarious ways, too. First, despite its fundamental position in this country's democratic imaginary, public education has not been immune to the market logic pushing

for the deregulation and privatization of long-assumed state functions. Movements such as charter schools, school vouchers, and Teach for America have challenged the status quo in public education through effective mobilization on common sense logic. Second, these privatizing forces have harnessed the media landscape described above to effectively persuade the public of their new logic of education, and as their sponsored content and public relations write the new discourse, they harness the power of rhetoric to frame these changes as fundamentally democratic in nature, artfully eliding their neoliberal logic. Conversely, as funding for traditional public education comes under heightened scrutiny for its resource allocation, it is far less likely that public systems will invest in robust public relations. Finally – and perhaps most pervasively – as federal education policy increasingly focuses narrowly on reading and math, coursework in social studies, history, civics – and indeed the study of journalism itself – is at the least de-emphasized and at worst completely removed from the curriculum. In turn, students leave school less equipped to critique the media narrative being presented.

Evolution in thought

I could write dense, discursive stuff like that forever. It's great fun to look to the likes of theorists like Foucault, Derrida, Gramsci, and Žižek for inspiration, systematically dismantling contemporary trends in a wash of post-modern fervor. And yet, where does that leave us? I look out my window and watch children walking to and from my neighborhood elementary school each morning and afternoon. And, well, I'm pretty sure my discourse analysis and post-modern critique isn't doing anything for them, no matter how sound the logic or relevant the content.

I'm teetering on a tightrope between two distinct terminals. On the one end, I am seeped in systems thinking about the impact of forces of globalization on media, education, social change, democracy, and culture. On the other, I am a resident and participant in my local neighborhood and community, finding ways to build and reinforce networks that improve the quality of life for my community and myself.

Public policy impacts what sort of children live in my neighborhood. It impacts whether they walk, bike, or get a ride to school in a car or bus or taxi. It impacts the funding that comes from local, state, and federal taxes, and the additional funds that come from parent input and private donors. It impacts the content of their curriculum, the architecture of their school building, and the food they eat at lunch. It impacts the languages they speak, the way their teachers are compensated, and the degree to which their school is responsive to their individual and collective needs. It impacts their health. It impacts their ability to play outside. In short, it pretty much impacts everything. Dominant discourse about education tends to fail on multiple fronts, but much like my personal tightrope, it fails most strikingly by remaining in the middle, never harnessing the strength of either terminal. On the one end, the discourse about education is strong when it is situated within the context of its public policy brethren in housing, transportation, agriculture, health, environmental, tax, immigration, labor, and more. Of course, this is also incredibly overwhelming. On the other end, the discourse in education is strong when it is rooted in the telling of individual stories, when it is devoted to the hyper-local focus of the systems impact on one neighborhood, one school, one teacher, one student. Of course, this is so specific as to be criticized for its lack of generalizability, or for its tendency to focus relentlessly on small successes to the elision of larger

problems. At the most basic level, however, discourse about education fails when it does not speak in the language of the general public, when it remains in the language of policymakers, scholars, and analysts. Unless the public narrative harnesses the power of strong and simple rhetoric, it will continue to fail to connect with the parents, teachers, neighbors, and astute students traveling to and from school each day. Before you can understand, you have to care. And to care, you have to connect with the power of a good story.

Response

Through the latent power of social networks, I discovered the Education Writers Association. Via Facebook, I discovered, sometime in early March, that a friend of a friend had won an award granted by the association for reporting on high school students in Philadelphia. Inspired by their mission to provide support for journalists covering education, and in particular in their "Story Starters" section, I felt like I had finally found a place for my skills and thinking to converge. Through years of working for the Nebraska Department of Education, I had developed a significant base of knowledge in this state's education landscape. And while my film production label has existed since 2005, I had never invested the time and energy in learning how to build a website to showcase and explain my work. Now, I had a purpose. Nocoastfilms.com was coming into focus.

In assembling the site, I developed a statement describing the trajectory of my documentary work and parallel or intersecting projects. I began with three ideas for story starters, two of which have since developed to include video interviews and simple explanations of the topic at hand. Additionally, I spent an inordinate amount of time

working to extract all the tweets I had written including the hashtag #gradschool throughout the semester, as they served as a mini-diary on my thought processes, stress levels, and general trajectory. Embedded in the sidebar, they offer a curious complimentary psychological insight into my research.

At this point, there are three stories in development, influenced primarily by coursework and discussion in both TEAC 908E: Debates in Teacher Education Policy and SOCI 860: Education and Society. The most developed is about the Accelere program in Omaha Public Schools, to which I was introduced by way of my research for Dr. Ted Hamann. Video interviews with program director Shari Koch and students at the school are couched in an explanation of the program, particularly from a sociological and structural perspective. The second story relates more specifically to teacher education and social justice, and includes a video interview with Greg Keller, a teacher at Lincoln High School. The third, which is in its infancy due to the volume of new readings influencing its development, centers on the idea of participatory democracy and public involvement in education.

As my work on this project develops, at the core, I am attempting to distill diverse sources, books, research articles, and press coverage into simple, clear, relatable language. It is an attempt not only to engage members of the media and community in learning about education issues in their neighborhood and state, but also to provide them with the extended resources to pursue topics of interest further. It is my hope and intention that this project will grow to include a forum for discussion and networking, resources for local mobilization, and a robust multimedia environment for civic engagement.

APPENDIX D: CHARTER SCHOOLS IN NEBRASKA? A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE SURROUNDING ONE STATE SENATOR'S LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL

Excerpted from a paper prepared for Dr. Theresa Catalano's Fall 2013 Seminar in

Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

In the 2013 session of the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature, Senator Scott Lautenbaugh introduced legislation that would permit the establishment of charter schools in Nebraska. Lautenbaugh, who represents portions of Douglas and Washington County just north of the city of Omaha, is not a member of the Legislature's Education Committee, and his bill never made it out of that committee and on to floor debate. Despite this unsuccessful attempt, Lautenbaugh has expressed his intent to reintroduce this legislation in 2014.

Nebraska is currently one of eight states without a state charter school law. Charter schools, which figure prominently in the national debate about public education, have received considerable media attention. A larger frame of analysis beyond the scope of this paper could evaluate why and how charter schools became the favored cause of the so-called education reform movement – in itself a deft bit of branding by private organizations looking to influence public education. Indeed, it is quite challenging to write about charter schools without invoking terms that indicate bias for or against these broader trends of free-market ideology, union rhetoric, and community involvement in schools. In order to examine the beginnings of this debate in Nebraska, then, a critical discourse analysis of media coverage of Lautenbaugh's bill can serve as a foundation for understanding how charter schools are being framed to the general public. A linguistic

deconstruction of press coverage – along with a comparison of the language used in the mass media with that used in press releases from two independent organizations lobbying for the bill – uncovers how Nebraska's debate is being shaped rhetorically and framed within the education discourse and political landscape of the state.

Methodology

In order to form a basis for analysis, I conducted a search on Google for articles in the Nebraska mainstream press regarding Senator Lautenbaugh's 2013 proposal. During the 2013 legislative session, the Omaha *World-Herald* published three stories specifically about or referencing charter school legislation. Omaha's National Broadcasting Company affiliate, WOWT, aired two stories, one of them from the Associated Press wire. In order to find a point of contrast and another modality, I found a 2012 story from NET Radio, the state's National Public Radio affiliate. This story, from member station KVNO, also of Omaha, profiles an Omaha focus school as a means to discuss charter school legislation. Notably absent from this list are any articles from the state's other leading newspaper, the Lincoln *Journal-Star*, which is known for its legislative coverage, as it is located in the state capital.[17] For purposes of linguistic comparison, I also found a press release from Americans for Prosperity-Nebraska (AFP-NE) and the Nebraska Alliance for Quality Education (NAQE), two interest groups lobbying Senator Lautenbaugh to introduce the charter legislation. Of particular interest is whether the language used in the press release is mirrored in the language of the news coverage; in other words, are journalists using press releases as a source, and, if so, what can be discerned from the bias in the language used?

In an effort to address multimodality and the differences in representation accordant to mode of presentation, I will compare the reporting done in print media versus that done in a radio piece, which, interestingly, includes a photograph in its online, text transcript form. Further, in the newspaper coverage, it is of note what photos are used in conjunction with the story – or, perhaps put more aptly, what is absent from those photographs. Finally, as the television reports are not feature stories but are on the website for a visually-oriented medium, they are each accompanied with a graphic.

Findings

Interestingly, all of the newspaper coverage approaches this topic in a thematic rather than an episodic frame. Further, as explained in O'Neill (2012), the newspaper articles all address this purely from a policy stance, and do not frame the story in terms of schooling, students, or communities. Similarly, the television stories – which were likely read as part of the introductory run of stories at the start of the news broadcast, due to their brevity and reliance on content from the Associated Press wire – are thematic, rather than episodic, features-style reporting.[18] Only the radio story takes an episodic approach, profiling an individual student and principal at one focus school in the Omaha metro area's Learning Community. From a multimodal perspective, this is quite interesting. Is it because the format of radio requires the telling of a more compelling narrative – of the creation of characters, as it were – that the radio story is episodic? It could also be that because the radio piece falls outside of the window in which the charter school bill was being discussed in the legislature that its focus is less on the politics in the Unicameral and more on the impact of charter and similar alternative schooling trends in schools in Nebraska.

Senator Lautenbaugh's bill would allow for the establishment of charter schools only within the city of Omaha. However, because a statutory change permitting charter schools in one part of the state would open debate for them to exist elsewhere, this PART FOR WHOLE[19] mapping is a deft political maneuver, as it is initially easier to introduce legislation that only (purportedly) impacts one part of the state, and then subsequently would be far simpler to amend an existing statute to expand the area in which charters could exist to encompass the whole state. In another sense, PART FOR WHOLE is also in play in that Omaha comes to represent the entirety of state's largest metropolitan area – a metonymy that is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Senator Lautenbaugh represents a district that is almost entirely outside of but adjacent to the city limits of Omaha. To delve even deeper into yet a smaller PART FOR WHOLE, Senator Lautenbaugh is quoted as claiming that "he intends for the schools to be set up east of 72nd Street and to serve only OPS students, although the bill does not specify that," (Anderson, 2013). Thus, eastern, northern, and southern Omaha – but nothing west of 72nd Street – comes to represent Omaha Public Schools, and more broadly, urban education in Nebraska. Implicit in this, then, is the racial demographics Lautenbaugh is targeting. Both the newspaper articles and the press release from AFP-NE and NAQE refer to charter schools in other states as serving primarily low-income and minority students, a framework that Lautenbaugh and the think tanks are adopting in Nebraska as well. Thus PART FOR WHOLE in this case also maps low-income and minority students as those in need of this bill.

With the PART FOR WHOLE established, the next metonymy that emerges is CHARTER SCHOOLS FOR TEACHERS. Indeed, the news articles universally omit any

mention of teachers, instead positing that it is the schools themselves that will benefit the

students. This is a particularly dangerous metonymy, and one in which another metaphor,

that of EDUCATION SYSTEM AS (FREE-MARKET) ECONOMICS[20] supports the

notion that SCHOOLS AS BUSINESSES solve any extant problems in the public

system. Hence, charter schools 'innovate' or 'transform', and further, they 'afford'

'choice' and 'provide opportunities'. What is suppressed is any role of teachers, parents,

or students in the process of learning. The entire concept of learning itself is

backgrounded, as the emphasis is merely on the choice to go to a charter school, and not

on what may be different about a charter versus a standard public school. Indeed, the

emphasis in this thematic approach to coverage is quite clearly on the politics of the

issue, and not on education as a process of learning situated in schools.

     As the majority of these stories are situated within the context of bill introduction

and legislative debate, the metaphor of POLITICS AS WAR is also quite clearly

prominent. The articles neatly set up two sides to the debate, framing the conflict as

existing between one senator and a couple think tanks on the one side and the state

education commissioner and other state education organizations on the other. If framed in

this metaphorical sphere of war, it is thus not within the narrative to introduce more sides

– that would just be too complicated! Thus, once again, the perspectives of community

members, teachers, local school officials, parents, and students are backgrounded.

     In comparing the press release from AFP-NE and NAQE with press coverage, it is

not readily apparent that Nebraska media outlets are copying the language of the

advocates for charter schools directly. However, it can be noted that the debate as they

frame it is being mapped into the press coverage – particularly the EDUCATION

SYSTEM AS (FREE-MARKET) ECONOMICS metaphor.

Importance for the 2014 Legislative Session…and beyond

As Senator Lautenbaugh has suggested he will be reintroducing charter legislation

in the upcoming legislative session, it is of utmost importance that not only Nebraska's

public education community, but activists and advocates for public education, community

members involved in local school politics, and, truthfully, the general public in the state

understand that the media's framing of charter school proposals in Nebraska has almost

entirely omitted any discussion of the perspectives of parents, teachers, or students in the

communities in which such schools would be opened. What is once again quite deft in the

suppression of the voices of community members, students, parents, and teachers is any

real answer to the question: Who wants this? Who is proposing this, and for whom? Or,

more bluntly, why the heck should North/East/South Omaha trust this (white) senator

from the suburbs who is claiming to propose a solution to (barely defined) problems in

their (not his) neighborhoods?

In order to overcome the EDUCATION AS ECONOMICS framing, it is

imperative that the public education community steer the narrative in the direction of a

discussion about learning, schooling, and what goes on inside the classroom. For this, the

KVNO radio story can serve as model of a step in the right direction. In countering the

POLITICS AS WAR discourse, the education community has a far more difficult task at

hand, namely overcoming the fundamental way in which journalists craft stories. While

thematic coverage is important in explaining policy, in this case, it has been so reductive

and simplified so as to obscure large sectors of the population the introduction of charter

schools would impact. As Stack (2007) explains, however, it is possible that journalists step out of their habitus, and it is therefore imperative that "educational leaders who wish to influence reporting on education [have] a better understanding of how to influence this stepping out" (p. 262), and indeed, that they simply better know how to influence the education discourse within the journalistic sphere. Or, perhaps, those wishing to engage the public in a discussion about the potential impact of charter school implementation on students and communities look to channels outside of the mainstream press to communicate their message. As Tamir & Davidson (2011) suggest, "it remains to be seen whether actors with less symbolic capital, like teacher educators, can reshape educational policy by using new media tools to change framing and conflict patterns in their favor" (p. 257) However, seeing as though the current media discourse obscures any perspective other than that of the political elites, it certainly cannot hurt to try.

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[17] The Lincoln *Journal-Star* (and the Omaha *World-Herald*) did publish stories in 2010 regarding a separate charter school proposal. It did not, however, cover the 2013 effort.
[18] As I was only able to obtain the transcripts, and not video of the broadcast, it is safe to assume that this is the manner in which these stories appeared, without any accompanying b-roll footage. If it were possible to find a recording – and if there were any accompanying imagery aside from the anchor reading the script, this would be of particular interest for multimodal analysis. However, due to their extreme brevity, it is unlikely that WOWT dedicated any video footage to accompany the stories.
[19] See the attached chart for a full mapping of metaphors and metonymies.
[20] I put free-market in parentheses because while it is the dominant undertone of the economic discourse in play, the language employed is not necessarily exclusively connected to neoliberal economics.

FIGURE 1: EXAMPLES OF METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN LAUTENBAUGH/CHARTER COVERAGE IN NEBRASKA PRESS

METAPHOR	Examples from News Articles
POLITICS AS BOXING MATCH	"Education chief *slams* charter school bill", "Breed *came out swinging"*
POLITICS AS WAR	"measure was *killed* in committee", "would *blow a hole* in the budget", "*kill* a pair of bills", "trying to *drum up* support", "*making out like Chinese bandits*"
EDUCATION SYSTEM AS (FREE MARKET) ECONOMICS	"educational *choice* options *afforded* to families", "*drain money* from public schools", "*save taxpayers money*", "*offer alternatives* to failing schools", "*provide options* for students *who cannot afford* private or parochial school tuition", "*allowed to serve* up to 1,000 students", "target students with the *greatest needs*", "through a *lottery* process", "*making out like Chinese bandits*", "immediately *put money first*"
METAPHOR	Examples from AFP Press Release
EDUCATION SYSTEM AS (FREE MARKET) ECONOMICS	"future *opportunities in life*", "too great a *societal cost*", "public charter schools can *offer just that*", "*well-operated* schools", "*achieve at high levels*", "become *productive members of society*"
METONYMY	Examples
PART FOR WHOLE	Omaha for the entire metropolitan area, areas east of 72nd Street for Omaha, Omaha for urban Nebraska, Omaha schools for all schools in the state, low income students for all students, minority students for low income students
POSITION FOR PERSON	Lawmakers, school officials, education officials
CHARTER SCHOOLS FOR TEACHERS (OBJECT FOR PERSON)	"charter schools can offer", "public charters have the potential", "well-conceived, well-operated schools can transform young lives", "charter schools could raise test scores", "charter schools can benefit all students"