

Education 'experts' may lack expertise, study finds

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The education experts cited in media stories and blog posts may have little background in research or education policy, suggests a new study by, left, curriculum specialist Joel R. Malin and education professor Christopher Lubieniski, both at the University of Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The people most often cited as "education experts" in blogs and news stories may have the backing of influential organizations - but have little background in education and education policy, a new study suggests.

The findings are cause for concern because some prominent interest groups are promoting reform agendas and striving to influence policymakers and public opinion using individuals who have substantial

[media](#) relations skills but little or no expertise in education research, say the authors of the study, Joel R. Malin and Christopher Lubienski, both at the University of Illinois.

To examine possible links between individuals' media presence and their levels of expertise, Malin and Lubienski compiled a diverse list of nearly 300 people who appeared on the lists of experts prepared by several major education advocacy and policy organizations, including the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the liberal National Education Policy Center.

Malin and Lubienski also added to their sample a handful of scholars not on those lists but who are prominent and influential in the field of education.

Each person's level of expertise was then scored using a formula that included their number of Google Scholar citations; their years of experience, calculated by subtracting the year they attained their highest degree from 2014; and whether or not the person had earned a doctoral or equivalent degree.

Each person's level of media influence was calculated based upon the number of times they were quoted or mentioned in education press, U.S. newspapers or blogs during 2013; whether they had a Twitter profile; and their Klout score, which is a proxy for social media influence.

Experts were more likely to be quoted or mentioned in newspapers and blogs if they had higher scores on Google Scholar, Malin and Lubienski found. Every 1-point increase in an expert's Google Scholar score was associated with a 1-percent increase in blog mentions.

Accordingly, each 1-point increase in years of experience corresponded with an increase of about 1 percent in newspaper citations, the

researchers found.

However, affiliation with a policy or advocacy organization also substantially increased an expert's media presence. People associated with the American Enterprise Institute were nearly 2.5 times more likely to be cited in education media.

Likewise, experts were 1.78 and 1.5 times more likely to be mentioned in blogs if they were affiliated with Cato or the American Enterprise Institute, respectively.

Although the initial list included 287 experts, Malin and Lubienski could not find the necessary information to estimate 52 of these individuals' years of experience. More than half of these people were connected to organizations such as Cato and Heritage.

While the three people in the sample who were affiliated with Cato each received the maximum number of points for blog mentions, these individuals' average estimated expertise score was 4.67 - substantially lower than the average score for the full sample, which was greater than 20.

Perhaps the most troubling finding was that possession of a doctoral degree was associated with 67 percent fewer blog citations and 60 percent fewer newspaper mentions, and fewer Klout points, which indicates that academic researchers with empirical expertise in education are often far removed from popular and policy conversations, Malin and Lubienski said.

"Our findings suggest that individuals with less expertise can often have greater success in media penetration," said Malin, a curriculum specialist with the Pathways Resource Center and a doctoral candidate in educational administration and leadership at the university. "Although

some individuals might not have formal training in research methods for analyzing the issues about which they are speaking, they possess skills and orientations that make them accessible and appealing to the media. And when these people are affiliated with organizations that have strong media arms or outreach efforts, they have the support and the incentive to engage broader and policy audiences."

"Newer forms of media offer particularly useful opportunities for directly engaging audiences, while bypassing traditional forms of quality checks on expertise," said Lubienski, a professor of [education policy](#) and director of the Forum on the Future of Public Education at the university. "We believe caution and consideration of individuals' expertise are warranted when reporters and bloggers are researching topics and seeking insights - and when policymakers and laypersons are consuming media."

Researchers who want to see their work have impact beyond the academic community must become more adept at communicating via traditional and new media. Otherwise, policy changes in [education](#) will be guided more by ideology and agendas than by research, Malin and Lubienski said.

The study was published in a recent issue of the journal *Education Policy Analysis Archives*.

More information: Educational Expertise, Advocacy, and Media Influence, epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/1706

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