'Micropopulism' may be turning education into a battlefield in the culture wars

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A new analysis of education debates on both social media and in traditional media outlets suggests that the education sector is being increasingly influenced by populism and the wider social media 'culture

wars'.

The study also suggests that the type of populism in question is not quite the same as that used to explain large-scale political events, such as the UK's 'Brexit' from the European Union, or Donald Trump's recent presidency in the United States.

Instead, the researchers—from the University of Cambridge, UK, and Queensland University of Technology, Australia—identify a phenomenon called "micropopulism": a localized populism which spotlights an aspect of public services, such as the education sector. Micropopulism is populist, they argue, in the sense that it expresses a fervent division between a disregarded "people" and an unjust elite.

The paper, by Dr. Steve Watson and Dr. Naomi Barnes, sketches out how think tanks, among other organizations, propagate such controversies using both new media and old. They highlight how 'wedge' issues are being used to prompt bitter disputes on social media between those with traditional views of education, and those who are more progressive.

'Traditional' teachers, in this context, argue that their authority in the classroom has been undermined by a largely university-based and ideologically-progressive 'elite' which, they claim, has used its institutional power to force them to use student-centered teaching methods which are not supported by scientific evidence. The polarized debate that ensues disguises the complexity of real classrooms, which in practice can be neither purely traditional, nor purely progressive.

The authors argue that "the claim that educational micropopulism is abroad in England and Australia is almost self-evident" and offer a theoretical analysis of how and why it is happening. As potential examples, they cite increasingly vitriolic and adversarial online standoffs

over issues such as teaching methods, discipline, or free speech on university campuses. Many of these appear to be linked to, or directly involve, think thanks or other groups with an interest in shaping policy. The paper calls for more evidence-gathering to understand the conditions which precipitate increasingly bitter debates within the education community, and warns that some vested interests may be using micropopulist tactics to influence policy.

Dr. Steve Watson, a lecturer at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, said: "We've reached the stage where there is enough evidence to indicate this issue requires more analysis and attention than it has received to date. There is clearly a relationship between education, policy-making, think tanks, media, and micropopulism—but its extent and consequences have yet to be fully determined."

Dr. Naomi Barnes, from the Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, said: "One concern is that at present, teachers and educators who are actively involved in these online discussions may not be aware of how controversy is being perpetuated and how bitter discussions go viral to help achieve policy-making objectives. There is a need to understand this more."

The authors argue that controversies in the media and on social channels enable would-be reformers to position progressives in education (often abbreviated to "progs") as an out-of-touch elite. Most obviously, this idea seems to match Michael Gove's infamous demonisation of progressive "bureaucrats, academics and teachers" unions' as 'The Blob'." One reformist government advisor has similarly praised [social media](#) 'trads' for instigating "a reformation of the church of education."

They also suggest that this reductive version of the debate now defines many of the most toxic arguments about education online. Watson, in particular, identifies Twitter—especially the popular #EduTwitter—as

the site of unpleasant confrontations about matters such as the #BanTheBooth debate on discipline in schools, or the use of phonics in primary education.

In higher education, the researchers document a similar pattern in which university leaders are demonized as lazy, careless, distant and heavy-handed. In Australia, this seems to parallel a recent upswing in efforts by the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) to actively publicize their policy arguments as research "findings."

The paper highlights 10 recent examples of this activity, which prompted national media headlines such as: "Our universities have caved in to lazy groupthink"; and "Don't bail out bloated unis". Similarly provocative articles are increasingly appearing in the UK media, concerning issues such as free speech on campus, or claims about infiltration by foreign governments.

Watson's own experiences suggest that some of the online confrontations, if not deliberately instigated, certainly involve strange forms of behavior. Last year, he published a paper highlighting possible evidence of micropopulist strategies on #EduTwitter. Within hours, this had provoked multiple angry responses on Twitter accusing him of fabricating a conspiracy theory—although many teachers and academics also posted messages of agreement.

As a result, the paper scored unusually well on Altmetric.com: a tool that tracks engagement with scholarly content online. Once this became apparent, the Twitter attacks not only ceased, but disappeared, with several critics deleting their posts as if attempting to stifle its popularity. "Extraordinarily, the paper may have gone some way to proving its own theory through the backlash it created," Watson said.

The authors believe that, at the very least, further research is needed to understand how today's education debates have become so schismatic. They warn that reasoned discussion about the future of education is being compromised. "We would recommend considering a digital citizenship initiative for education professionals to counter this," Barnes added.

More information: Steven Watson et al, Online educational populism and New Right 2.0 in Australia and England, *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2021.1882292

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