



# The Research that Reaches the Public: Who Produces the Educational Research Mentioned in the News Media?

Holly Yettick

University of Colorado at Boulder

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## Education Policy Research Unit

Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
College of Education, Arizona State University  
P.O. Box 872411, Tempe, AZ 85287-2411  
Telephone: (480) 965-1886  
Fax: (480) 965-0303  
E-mail: [epsl@asu.edu](mailto:epsl@asu.edu)  
<http://edpolicylab.org>

## Education and the Public Interest Center

School of Education,  
University of Colorado  
Boulder, CO 80309-0249  
Telephone: (303) 447-EPIC  
Fax: (303) 492-7090  
Email: [epic@colorado.edu](mailto:epic@colorado.edu)  
<http://epicpolicy.org>

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# **The Research that Reaches the Public: Who Produces the Educational Research Mentioned in the News Media?**

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## ***Executive Summary***

Even people who know or care deeply about schools often lack the time or the inclination to wade through academic journals on education. Instead they get most of their information from the trade press or popular press. Because the research featured in these outlets influences policymakers, practitioners and parents, it is important to know who produces the educational research mentioned in the news media.

Of particular interest is the proliferation, in recent decades, of advocacy-oriented private think tanks, many of which eschew traditional, peer-reviewed academic forums such as refereed academic journals or conferences, which are designed to provide a measure of quality control before a research report is finalized and disseminated. They focus instead on actively seeking out publicity in the popular press. A key focus of this report is the degree to which such research is actually represented in popular media outlets.

Of course, the popular and trade press also covers research produced by, among others, government entities and universities. In order to identify the various sources of research cited in the news media, education-related stories were examined in two prominent daily newspapers (the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*) and the influential education newspaper, *Education Week*. Research sources were sorted into categories, such as university, governmental entity, and private think tank.

An analysis of 864 articles published in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* in 2007 and in *Education Week* during the first six months of 2008 yielded two primary findings:

1. Education Week most often cited university-based research, while The New York Times and The Washington Post most often cited research produced by governmental entities.
2. Although university and government sources were cited more often, a higher percentage of reports produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks were cited by both types of publications. Universities produce

14 to 16 times more research than think tanks, but the three publications only mentioned their studies twice as often as think tank reports. As a result, any given think tank report was substantially more likely to be cited than any given study studies produced by a university.

## Recommendations

Given these findings, it is recommended that education reporters and editors adopt the following guidelines when writing about educational research:

- **Expand your source list.** The findings of this study suggest that think tank research is over-represented in media coverage. Unlike think tank employees, university professors generally lack the incentives and resources to conduct public relations campaigns involving outreach to journalists. However, many would like their research to reach the public. Like their science- or medical-reporting peers, education reporters should consult peer-reviewed research and cultivate university researchers, who should be able to recommend major, peer-reviewed studies in their fields. (Appendix A to this brief includes a list of resources.)
- **If you do decide that a think tank study merits recognition, do your own quality control.** Vet reports before publishing. Most research reports will not lose news value during the time taken to verify their soundness. A good method of conducting such verification is to consult with a trustworthy person with expertise in research design and statistics. This person does not necessarily have to be in the educational field but should have a deep understanding of quality research methods in the social sciences and should read the full report, not just the executive summary. In addition, consult subject matter specialists, ideally those who have read the report. If the reporter is only able to consult subject-matter experts who have not read the report, note this in the article, helping readers understand that the study's findings should be taken with caution until experts have had time to fully review the results. For instance, the article might include the sentence, "Other experts in the field have not yet had an opportunity to assess this study, which has not gone through peer review, a process that serves as an important quality control for research in education."
- **Include full disclosure.** Regardless of who produced the study, the article should link to the full report so readers can judge for themselves. Non-peer-reviewed research should also be labeled as such.

# **The Research that Reaches the Public: Who Produces the Educational Research Mentioned in the News Media?**

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## ***Introduction***

In recent years, think tanks have grown in number and in public prominence. Many produce education-related reports cited in the popular press. This has raised concerns among educators who fear that ideological goals and marketing objectives of these organizations may result in shoddy work that gives short shrift to empirical methods and ignores well-established professional norms meant to ensure research quality.<sup>1</sup> These norms include subjecting research reports to peer scrutiny prior to publication and systematically accounting for and ruling out plausible counter-explanations for the results.<sup>2</sup> It is, in fact, true that advocacy-oriented think tanks rarely have their research peer reviewed and have repeatedly been found to engage in research practices that cast suspicion on the validity of the findings reported and the implications drawn from those findings.<sup>3</sup>

Although the analysis presented here does not address directly the quality of think tank research, it does proceed on the assumption that the public interest will be best served when media coverage of education research is based on two key principles: (1) the quality of the research should be judged *before* a coverage decision is made, and (2) the coverage should help the reader understand the strengths and weaknesses of the research that is covered. This analysis also proceeds on the assumption that university research is more likely to follow the academic conventions created to help ensure the integrity of the findings reported, and that this university research is embedded in a culture that expects, values and rewards peer review of research. None of this, however, should be interpreted as concluding that advocacy-oriented think tanks cannot and do not produce quality research, nor that studies produced through academic venues are universally sound.

In a 2007 commentary in *Education Week*, education professors Kevin Welner and Alex Molnar summarized the findings of reviews of reports produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks, reviews sponsored by their “Think Tank Review Project.”

Often written by people with little discernible expertise and invariably not subjected to peer review, these reports consistently end with a findings section that supports the ideological preferences of the research sponsor. Moreover, the research offered by many private think tanks commonly violates the standard canons of social science inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

While the ideologically driven policy agendas of these think tanks are generally quite prominent on their websites or other promotional material, news articles often do not identify the ideological commitments behind the studies they report.<sup>5</sup> Nor, as a rule, do news articles note whether or not a given research report has been peer reviewed.

These oversights are not trivial. Although the extent to which the press influences public policy and opinion remains open to debate, a solid research base indicates that it does play some role in shaping both.<sup>6</sup> Evidence also suggests that research and credentialed experts can influence the opinions of the public and policymakers.<sup>7</sup> For example, a study by William Howell of the University of Chicago surveyed 2,000 adults and found that 75% of respondents believed that private school students scored higher on tests than public school students.<sup>8</sup> A subset of the respondents then received the results from a fictional study indicating that private school students actually performed worse, and more than a quarter of them reversed their views. Given the potential of media and research reports to shape public policy and opinion, it is a matter of public concern if the educational research appearing in the news media is unsound, misleading, or determined by marketing and accessibility rather than quality.

Although minimal research has examined think tank coverage in the context of education coverage overall, a 2007 study by Eric Haas found that the media frame both advocacy- and non-advocacy-oriented think tank research similarly, as equally credible.<sup>9</sup> Also relevant is a 1988 study by Carol Weiss and Eleanor Singer, finding that the elite news media were devoting (in the 1980s) an increasing portion of their meager coverage of social science research to reports produced by think tanks.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Research Questions***

As a new administration formulates its education policies and the future of the No Child Left Behind policy hangs in the balance, it is important to understand the extent to which research produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks appears in the media. This study, therefore, addresses the following questions:

1. During the period covered, how many times was the education-related research cited in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Education Week* produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks, universities, government and other entities?
2. Are there discernible patterns in the type of sources cited?
3. Taking into account how many research documents universities and advocacy-oriented think tanks produce annually, is research produced by each type of organization proportionally represented in the media outlets studied?

## Methods

*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Education Week* were selected for analysis based on a 2006 study conducted by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, a division of the non-profit organization that publishes *Education Week*. The study explored the question of which organizations most influence educational policy.<sup>11</sup> According to the study, the eleven most influential information sources were as listed in Figure 1:

**Figure 1. Sources of Information that Influence Education**

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress
2. <i>Education Week</i>
3. National Center for Education Statistics
4. <i>The New York Times</i>
5. U.S. Department of Education
6. Education Trust
7. <i>The Washington Post</i>
8. (tie) <i>Education Next</i> and the Public Education Network (PEN) Weekly NewsBlast
10. Eduwonk
11. Education Gadfly

Source: Swanson and Barlage (2006).

Of these, four are not media outlets (National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and the Education Trust) and three are themselves affiliated with think tanks (*Education Next*, the Education Gadfly and Eduwonk<sup>12</sup>). Of the remaining four organizations, three—*Education Week*,<sup>13</sup> *The New York Times*<sup>14</sup> and *The Washington Post*<sup>15</sup>—are publications that local outlets look to when “determining top stories and the organizing plots that help journalists screen information and decide what to emphasize or downplay in their stories.”<sup>16</sup> Because the PEN Weekly NewsBlast does not generally include original content, it was omitted in favor of focusing on the three print publications.

Search terms for initially identifying articles to be screened were modeled on the Haas study.<sup>17</sup> Next, only articles that reported on research studies were chosen for inclusion in this study. Thus, an article that included a quotation from an “expert” but did not allude to a specific research study by that expert was omitted.<sup>18</sup> In cases where a judgment had to be made about article content, the deciding criterion was whether a topic reported in a popular outlet was of the type likely to appear in *Education Week*.<sup>19</sup> An additional criterion for inclusion was that the research reported be linked to an identifiable institution. Thus, for example, articles that referenced books but that did not include an institutional affiliation for the authors were omitted.<sup>20</sup>

The number of relevant articles in *Education Week* (the trade publication) was, not surprisingly, far greater than the number in either *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. For this reason, six months' coverage (January 1 through June 30, 2008) from *Education Week* was included in the study. In order to obtain an adequate sample from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, a year's coverage (January 1, 2007 through December 31, 2007) was included.<sup>21</sup> Even so, the *Education Week* articles produced in just six months came close to equaling the combined total of the other two: 399 articles from *Education Week*, 319 articles from *The Washington Post*, and 146 articles from *The New York Times* met the criteria for inclusion in this study.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of analysis, articles were divided into two groups. Articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were merged, while *Education Week* articles were considered separately. This served the study's purpose of comparing popular with trade outlets, rather than comparing specific media outlets with one other. In addition, pooling the relatively small samples from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* provided a larger and presumably more powerful basis for the comparison to the trade publication.

The two types of publications were analyzed during different periods. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* analysis period ran from Jan 1 to Jan 31 2007 while the *Education Week* analysis period was from Jan 1 2008 to June 30 2008. This was done in an effort to provide the most recent data possible for the analysis. Because this research was conducted in 2008, the most recent full, calendar year available at that time for analysis was 2007. However, it was possible to include more recent data for *Education Week* since the time period only covered six months. Due to the rapidly-occurring changes in the news media (publications closing, content migrating online) it seemed important to collect the most recent data possible even if it meant that the time periods for the two types of publications did not overlap.

## *Findings*

### **Identifying and Counting Citations**

Identifying and counting citations proceeded in several steps. First, the type of institution associated with each research study cited was identified. In cases where multiple affiliations were cited, all were included. University-affiliated research/policy centers were counted both as a citation for the policy center (for example, the Center on Reinventing Public Education) and for the university (the University of Washington); however, when an article cited such a policy center without mentioning its host university, the university was not counted. That is, the primary institutional association of a study's source is always included, and additional associations are included if they are expressly noted in the article. *Education Week* cited research associated with 445 different institutions (whether think tank, university, or some other type of group such as a trade association) a total of 946 times and in the 399 different articles. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* combined cited research associated with 515 institutions 945 times



and in 465 different articles. Institutions mentioned were then classified into the broad categories described in Figure 2 (following)

While categories of some institutions were obvious (as in the case of government agencies), others did not make for easy classification, so additional categories were added for university-based research and policy centers and for a number of niches for organizations in areas like “testing” (such as the Education Testing Service [ETS], which produces research but is primarily devoted to testing) and “foundations” (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which funds but generally does not produce research). Original studies conducted by media outlets were classified as “media.” An example of a study in this category is Quality Counts, an annual report on education produced jointly by *Education Week* and Editorial Projects in Education Research Center.

**Figure 2. Classifications**

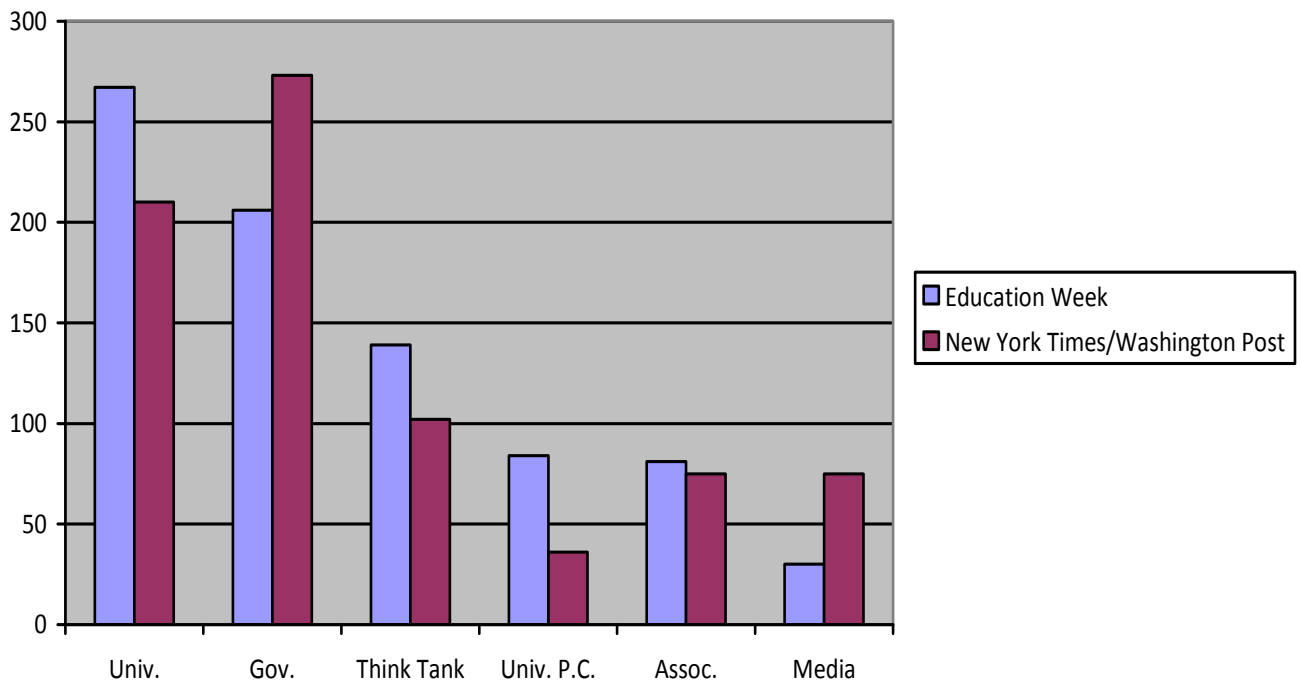
Classification	Example
Association	<i>National School Boards Association</i>
Foundation	<i>Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation</i>
For-profit institution	<i>Mathematica Policy Research Institute</i>
Government	
(international)	<i>Iraqi Ministry of Education</i>
(federal)	<i>U.S. Department of Education</i>
(state)	<i>New York State Department of Education</i>
(local)	<i>Montgomery County, MD School Board</i>
Hospital	<i>Children’s Hospital, Boston</i>
Legal-advocacy	<i>American Civil Liberties Union</i>
Media	<i>Education Week</i>
Museum	<i>Museum of Science &amp; Industry, Chicago</i>
Other	<i>Southern Regional Education Board</i>
Political Action Committee	<i>Democrats for Education Reform</i>
Think tank	<i>Brookings Institution</i>
Testing company or organization	<i>Educational Testing Service</i>
University-affiliated research/policy center	<i>Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington</i>
University	<i>Harvard</i>
Union	<i>National Education Association</i>

## Most Frequent Citations by the Trade and Popular Press

In *Education Week*, research associated with a university was most frequently cited. University research comprised 28% of *Education Week's* education-related research citations, followed by government research (22%). As shown in Figure 3, the opposite was true for the research most commonly cited in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Those publications were most likely to cite government research (29% of total education-related research citations) followed by university research (22%). Reports from university-affiliated policy or research centers were also more likely to appear in *Education Week* articles than in newspaper articles, making up 9% of total *Education Week* citations analyzed but only 4% of total education-related citations in the daily newspapers.

Research from non-university-based, private think tanks was slightly more often cited in *Education Week* articles (15% of total education-related citations) than in popular press articles (11% of total education-related citations). *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were more likely to cite media-generated research (8% of their total citations) than was *Education Week* (3%). This was due in part to extensive coverage by *The Washington Post* of its own ranking system for high schools, which *Post* reporters in turn contrasted with a similar ranking systems devised by *U.S. News and World Report*, another media outlet. All other types of research institutions were cited at similar rates by all three publications (see Appendix B).

**Figure 3. Citations in popular and trade publications**



The initial part of this study, then, suggests that research associated with private think tanks is cited in fewer articles than research associated with either a univer-

sity or a governmental entity. This does not, however, answer a related question: Given the relative volume of research produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks and by universities, what is the likelihood that a study is covered by these media outlets?

### **Universities versus Advocacy-Oriented Think Tanks: Whose Research Is Most Likely to be Cited?**

This study was initiated by university researchers concerned about the methodological rigor and motivations behind the educational research emanating from the rapidly proliferating body of advocacy-oriented think tanks. Given these concerns, the comparisons that follow include only university-based research and advocacy-oriented think tank research. Although not without its own critics and flaws, government-produced research has not been a focus of this particular debate.<sup>23</sup> Neither has research produced by non-advocacy-oriented think tanks such as the American Institutes for Research. Such think tanks produced 30% of the 139 think tank research studies cited in *Education Week* and 17% of the 102 think tank studies cited in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

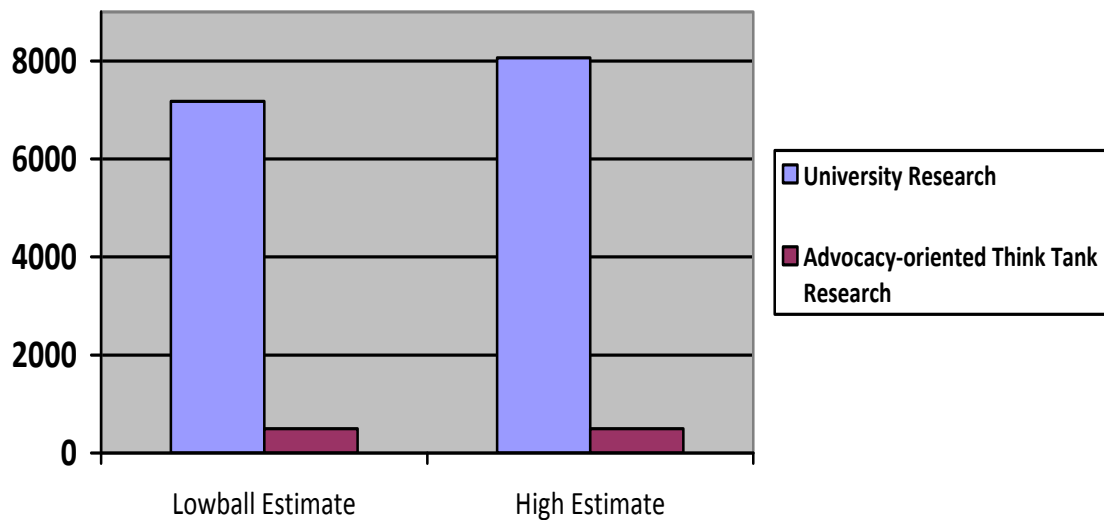
Since universities likely produce more research overall than think tanks, it is not surprising that the three publications included in this study cite university research more often than studies produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks.<sup>24</sup> But this does not mean that any given study is more likely to be cited. To explore this issue of probability, a tally was taken of the total number of education-related studies appearing in 2007 on the websites of the 99 advocacy-oriented think tanks that produced research referenced by either the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post* in 2007 or in *Education Week* in 2008.<sup>25</sup> (see Appendix D). Added to the total were reports produced in 2007 by five prominent think tanks that were not cited by any of these publications (see Appendix E).<sup>26</sup> Combined, these 104 think tanks produced 499 education-related reports in 2007. This estimate should not be interpreted as representing the full universe of education-related advocacy-oriented think tank reports produced in 2007, but it does likely capture the bulk of the sector's production.

To best approximate the number of university research documents produced in 2007, a range for the number of education research documents associated with universities was calculated using two different approaches. The first estimate was arrived at by counting the number of papers accepted for presentation at the 2008 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). A total of 8,064 papers were accepted.<sup>27</sup> (Although all AERA conference proposals are peer reviewed, these reviews are generally based on proposals rather than finished papers.) The second estimate included all papers published in 2007 in 176 peer-refereed education journals. These journals probably come close to representing the complete universe of major, peer-reviewed, English-language education journals currently published worldwide (see Appendix C). Combined, these journals published 7,172 articles in 2007. A caveat is that neither estimate includes research produced by university-affiliated policy centers (except indirectly, if such a study were also published in one of the journals or presented at AERA). Given the earlier finding that 89 different university-affiliated centers

in 2007 and 2008 produced research that was cited a combined total of 120 times in the publications surveyed, it seems likely that the number of university-associated research studies is understated, but the same is true of our estimate of think tank reports.

The two approaches generated very similar estimates of the number of university-produced educational studies in 2007. Using the lower estimate of 7,172, universities produced more than fourteen times as many reports in 2007 as did advocacy-oriented think tanks, which produced 499. If the higher estimate (8,064 research documents) is used, university researchers in 2007 produced more than sixteen times as many studies as did think tanks (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Total university and think tank research produced in 2007 (with high vs. low estimates for university research)**

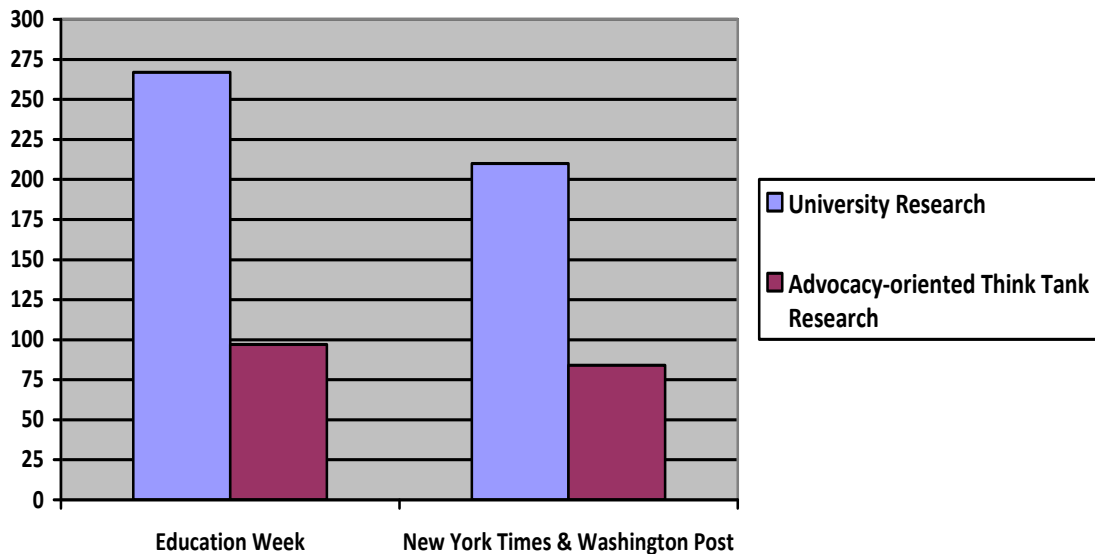


During the first six months of 2008, *Education Week* mentioned university-associated research studies 267 times, more than twice as many times (97) as advocacy-oriented think-tank research documents were mentioned (Figure 5, following). *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* similarly cited more than two times as many university-associated research documents (210) as advocacy-oriented, think-tank-associated research documents (84).

Given the estimate that universities actually produced 14 to 16 times more research studies than advocacy-oriented think tanks in 2007, however, university research was under-represented and think tank research was over-represented in both types of publications. Using the 8,064 estimate of university-associated research studies, in order for university-associated research to be represented at same rate as advocacy-oriented, think-tank-associated research, *Education Week* would have had to have dropped its number of citations of think tank reports from 97 to only 17. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* would have cited 13 advocacy-oriented think-tank studies, instead of 84. Using the lower, 7,172 estimate

of university-associated research studies, the drops would have been to 19 for *Education Week* and 15 for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

**Figure 5. University and advocacy-oriented think tank research cited in *Education Week* and *The New York Times/Washington Post***

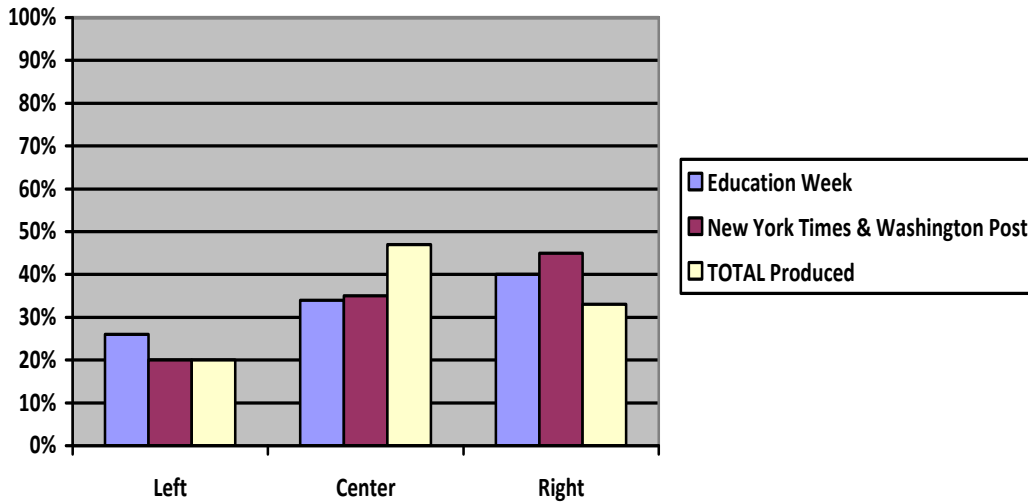


### **Ideological Orientation of Advocacy-Oriented Think Tanks**

Advocacy-oriented think tanks tend to have an ideological or political orientation, although categorizing that orientation is sometimes difficult. In order to estimate the respective number of citations to research produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks of differing orientations, a modified version of the taxonomy employed by “Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting,” in that organization’s annual reports of media citations of think tanks, was used.<sup>28</sup> Think tanks’ classifications were also determined by examining their online research reports and mission statements. This process was necessarily subjective, since one person’s definition of left/progressive may be another’s definition of centrist or even right/conservative, and vice versa. Appendix F. explains the taxonomy used to categorize the think tanks included in this study (Appendices D and E present a complete list of think tanks, along with their assigned classifications.)<sup>29</sup>

As shown in Figure 6 (following), although 47% of advocacy-oriented think-tank research was produced by organizations classified as “centrist,” only 34% of think-tank research cited by *Education Week* in 2007 was produced by centrist think tanks. In *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, 35% of think-tank research cited was produced by centrist think tanks.

**Figure 6. Think tank reports produced in 2007 and cited in *Education Week* and *The New York Times/Washington Post* during the study period**



In contrast, research produced by right-leaning think tanks was over-represented in all three outlets. Right-leaning think tanks produced 33% of advocacy-oriented think tank studies in 2007. In *Education Week*, 40% of advocacy-oriented think tank studies were produced by right-leaning organizations. In *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, 45% of advocacy-oriented think tank studies were produced by the right-leaning organizations.

Finally, research produced by left-leaning think tanks (20% of the total) was over-represented in *Education Week* (26%) but proportionately represented in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (20%). For a more detailed look at the advocacy-oriented think tank reports produced in 2007 and cited by *Education Week* and the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, see Appendix G. Keeping in mind the categorical subjectivity that went into this analysis as well as its sensitivity to just one or two very effective (or ineffective) outlets, it is offered here only as a first look; no conclusions are drawn.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

This study suggests reports produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks may receive a disproportionate share of attention but do not dominate media coverage of educational research. Universities were the most prominent source of education-related studies cited in *Education Week*, and government-associated research was most common in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Think tanks were the third most frequently cited source in both types of publications. While we did not analyze the ratio of government research produced to government research cited, the fact that government studies are more prevalent in the popular newspapers than in *Education Week* is not surprising, given past media research and theory. This finding, for example, is consistent with studies by Lance Bennett, Gaye Tuchman, Herbert Gans and others, who have found that top

government officials are both the subject and the source of almost all news in the mainstream press, even in well-staffed newspapers like the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.<sup>30</sup> In this instance, *Education Week*, a trade publication, arguably fits the definition of the alternative media. Because the audience of alternative media is relatively small and targeted and the trickle-down effect to local outlets less pronounced, the alternative media are generally subject to less direct influence by those in power and have more leeway to seek out non-governmental sources. Another theory is that trade publications focus mostly on professional matters while the popular press focuses more on political matters and government.

Given the size of the sample and the subjectivity of the methodology, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the degree to which each publication type over- or under-represented research produced by centrist, right- or left-leaning advocacy think tanks. To some extent, one person's right-leaning think tank is another person's left-leaning think tank and vice versa. In addition, because of the small numbers, a single think tank can have an over-sized influence on a particular category.

The findings of this study do strongly suggest that advocacy-oriented think tanks are over-represented as compared to university research, however. This result appears to contradict previous media research that concludes that professional norms call for reporters to strive for objectivity, eschew partisanship and rely on the reputation of the person or organization producing the information they cite.<sup>31</sup> On that basis, one might predict that reporters would view think tanks that openly promote advocacy-oriented agendas as less objective than a university professor. Advocacy-oriented think tanks also tend to have less of a track record than most universities, because they have existed for less time, and one might also predict that their reputations would therefore be weaker, given that a strong reputation takes time to develop. Yet research produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks is being cited frequently by reporters at the three outlets studied.

One explanation for the disproportionate representation of think-tank research is that think tanks may focus on subjects that are of strong public interest, and thus potentially more likely to interest journalists. By contrast, scholarly research covers a broader array of subjects, including some that primarily interest education professionals or other scholars. On the other hand, there may be something of a "chicken or the egg" problem at work: Are particular topics covered because they are inherently more newsworthy, or because they are the focus of research by a think tank that is especially skilled at getting its agenda before the press? Additionally, to what degree are particular think tanks defining "public interest" by pushing a pet research interest and then rendering it appetizing to reporters via public relations? Whatever the case, it would be fruitful to explore further how and why journalists select some educational research for coverage and reject others.

Explanations for this finding point also toward other practical realities of current education reporting. Unlike their colleagues who cover the hard sciences, reporters who write about education rarely use peer-refereed academic journals as sources of information.<sup>32</sup> Because education reporters do not select research studies based on the peer-review process (and thus on the basis of the judgment of

researchers well-versed in their fields), they necessarily rely on other criteria. Based on Weiss and Singer's research, a key criterion likely concerns the application of journalistic values such as whether the study challenges accepted beliefs, addresses a controversial topic, or is related to what is already in the news.<sup>33</sup> Adding to this are issues of access, because, as Weiss and Singer state, "research doesn't happen in places routinely covered by the press."<sup>34</sup> As a result, coverage is more likely when the sponsor or conductor of the research reaches out to the reporter via, for instance, a press release or press conference.<sup>35</sup> It is thus less than surprising that organizations such as advocacy-oriented think tanks with well-established and aggressive marketing departments would attract a disproportionate share of coverage. Universities do have public relations departments and may engage in public relations activities, but they do not generally view public relations as a primary mission.

Related to this, universities and advocacy-oriented think tanks employ different incentive structures. Think tank researchers are highly motivated to seek attention from reporters because their funders often evaluate the organization based upon the degree to which it maintains a high profile in the popular press.<sup>36</sup> A high media profile is often viewed as a sign that the think tank's agenda is reaching, and thus influencing, policymakers. Academics, by contrast, are motivated to seek professional advancement (e.g., tenure), which is rewarded largely on the basis of publication in peer-refereed, academic journals (which journalists who cover education rarely read.). Further, far from being seen as praiseworthy, a high profile in the mainstream media may be viewed with suspicion.

The fact that much educational research occurs outside the traditional stomping grounds of the mainstream press may also help explain the relative dearth of educational research cited in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, as compared to *Education Week*. The latter outlet produced nearly as many articles containing research results in six months as the two daily newspapers combined produced in an entire year. Due to the nature of their publication, which sets aside weekly space for reporting research, *Education Week* reporters have incentives to veer off the beaten path to actively seek out educational studies. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* reporters may lack such incentives.

In an ideal world, such incentives would exist for all kinds of news outlets, since it is important for policy and practice to be based on credible research. There is a policy benefit if the most widely disseminated studies are those of the highest quality, produced by well-trained researchers who insist upon methodological rigor. Yet the findings of this study suggest that reports produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks garner a disproportionate share of citations in the popular press. For those who believe that such advocacy organizations are often more attentive to ideology than to methodology, there is both good news and bad to be found here. On the one hand, the diet of educational research being fed to the reader of these three major news outlets is probably more wholesome than some have feared. On the other hand, it is perhaps less sustentative than it should and could become.



## Recommendations

Given these findings, it is recommended that education reporters and editors adopt the following guidelines when writing about educational research:

- **Expand your source list.** The findings of this study suggest that think tank research is over-represented in media coverage. Unlike think tank employees, university professors generally lack the incentives and resources to conduct public relations campaigns involving outreach to journalists. However, many would like their research to reach the public. Like their science- or medical-reporting peers, education reporters should consult peer-reviewed research and cultivate university researchers, who should be able to recommend major, peer-reviewed studies in their fields. (Appendix A to this brief includes a list of resources.)
- **If you do decide that a think tank study merits recognition, do your own quality control.** Vet reports before publishing. Most research reports will not lose news value during the time taken to verify their soundness. A good method of conducting such verification is to consult with a trustworthy person with expertise in research design and statistics. This person does not necessarily have to be in the educational field but should have a deep understanding of quality research methods in the social sciences and should read the full report, not just the executive summary. In addition, consult subject matter specialists, ideally those who have read the report. If the reporter is only able to consult subject-matter experts who have not read the report, note this in the article, helping readers understand that the study's findings should be taken with caution until experts have had time to fully review the results. For instance, the article might include the sentence, "Other experts in the field have not yet had an opportunity to assess this study, which has not gone through peer review, a process that serves as an important quality control for research in education."
- **Include full disclosure.** Regardless of who produced the study, the article should link to the full report so readers can judge for themselves. Non-peer-reviewed research should also be labeled as such.

## ***Appendix A: Resources for Journalists who Cover Educational Research***

### **1. Teachers College Record ([www.tcrecord.org](http://www.tcrecord.org))**

Cost: \$15 per year

Benefits: On-line access, including weekly email updates and unlimited archive searching back to 1900

### **2. Harvard Educational Review (<http://www.hepg.org/main/her/Index.html>)**

Cost: \$59 for one year, \$99 for two years

Benefits: On-line and print subscription, unlimited archive searching back to 1993, access to online “extras” such as book excerpts from Harvard Education Press.

### **3. American Educational Research Association (<http://www.aera.net>)**

Cost: \$120 per year (membership fee)

Benefits: Membership includes subscriptions to Educational Researcher and one additional AERA journal of your choice. (For education reporters, Review of Educational Research and Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis are probably most helpful.) Additional journal subscriptions: \$20 per year. For an additional \$40 per year, you have online access to the archives of 6 AERA journals. However, the most recent articles available via this archive are five years old.

Note: Even if you are not a paid member, AERA provides media-friendly summaries of new research highlights of its annual meeting and other resources.

### **4. Education Policy Analysis Archives (<http://epaa.asu.edu/>)**

Cost: Free

Benefits: Free access to a peer-reviewed journal, including archives.

### **5. Education Writers Association Public Editor**

([http://www.ewa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources\\_publiceditor](http://www.ewa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources_publiceditor) )

Cost: Free

Benefits: The newly-created public editor position is designed to provide reporters with, among other things, a means of finding and coordinating with education experts and sources. The first public editor is former Washington Post reporter Linda Perlstein. ([lperlstein@ewa.org](mailto:lperlstein@ewa.org)), (410-539-2464).

### **6. The Hechinger Institute Guide to Education Research for Journalists**

(<http://hechinger.tc.columbia.edu/default.aspx?pageid=780>)

Cost: Free

Benefits: This guide was created by the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Columbia University, a non-profit organization that provides professional development for reporters. The publication includes descriptions of common research designs and tips for understanding, covering and asking questions about educational research.

## *Appendix B: Summary of Citations*

### Citations by publication and institution type

<i>Education Week</i> (1/108-6/30/08)	Type of Organization	Percentage of Citations (Number of Citations)	<i>New York Times &amp; Washington Post</i> (1/107-12/31/07)	Type of Organization	Percentage of Citations (Number of Citations)
	University	28% (267)		Government	29% (273)
	Government	22% (206)		University	22% (210)
	Think Tank	15% (139)		Think Tank	11% (102)
	Policy center (university-affiliated)	9% (84)		Association	8% (75)
	Association	9% (81)		Media	8% (75)
	Foundation	5% (44)		Other	7% (64)
	For-profit	4% (39)		For-profit	4% (42)
	Other	4% (35)		Policy center (university-affiliated)	4% (36)
	Media	3% (30)		Foundation	3% (30)
	Union	1% (8)		Testing Organization	2% (18)
	Testing organization	1% (7)		Law	1% (10)
	Law	.4% (4)		Hospital	.7% (7)
	Museum	.1% (1)		Union	.3% (3)
	Political Action Committee	.1% (1)			
<b>TOTAL</b> <sup>37</sup>		946	<b>TOTAL</b>		945

## *Appendix C: Journal Articles in 2007*

### Peer-refereed Education Journals that Published Articles in 2007

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
The Hispanic outlook in higher education	512
Language arts [electronic resource]	212
English journal	173
The modern language journal [electronic resource]	159
The Mathematics teacher	140
Adolescence	127
Computers & education [electronic resource]	126
Teaching children mathematics	121
College student journal	104
Teaching and teacher education [electronic resource]	102
Journal of experimental psychology. Learning, memory, and cognition [electronic resource]	93
Teachers College record [electronic resource]	91
Educational gerontology [electronic resource]	84
Higher education [electronic resource]	83
Journal of visual impairment & blindness	81
The review of higher education [electronic resource]	78
Journal of educational psychology	77
Psychology in the schools [electronic resource]	73
Community college journal of research and practice [electronic resource]	72

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Journal of biological education	71
Early childhood education journal [electronic resource]	68
Voices from the middle	64
Voices from the middle [electronic resource]	64
International journal of educational development [electronic resource]	62
The Journal of Negro education	62
Teaching in higher education [electronic resource]	61
Economics of education review [electronic resource]	61
Teaching exceptional children	58
International journal of bilingual education and bilingualism [electronic resource]	55
Learning and instruction [electronic resource]	53
The Clearing house [electronic resource]	50
The British journal of educational psychology	49
History of education quarterly [electronic resource]	49
Roeper review [electronic resource]	49
British educational research journal [electronic resource]	47
Multicultural education	47
The British journal of developmental psychology	46
Mathematics and computer education	46
Theory into practice [electronic resource]	45
Art education	45

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Journal of computer assisted learning [electronic resource]	44
Educational psychology [electronic resource]	44
British journal of sociology of education [electronic resource]	44
Child welfare	43
Journal of educational computing research	43
The international journal of educational management [electronic resource]	42
ASHE higher education report [electronic resource]	41
Journalism & mass communication educator	41
School psychology review	40
School psychology international [electronic resource]	39
International journal of lifelong education [electronic resource]	39
The Journal of educational research [electronic resource]	38
Alberta journal of educational research	36
Journal of experiential education	36
Studies in philosophy and education [electronic resource]	36
Education next	36
International journal of inclusive education [electronic resource]	36
Journal of research on adolescence [electronic resource]	36
Oxford review of education [electronic resource]	35
Journal of educational change [electronic resource]	35
Reading research quarterly	35

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Radical teacher	35
Journal of instructional psychology	34
Research in higher education [electronic resource]	34
International journal of educational research [electronic resource]	34
Paedagogica historica [electronic resource]	33
College teaching [electronic resource]	33
Studies in art education	33
Language and education	33
Preventing school failure [electronic resource]	32
Educational theory [electronic resource]	32
Educational action research [electronic resource]	32
Cambridge journal of education [electronic resource]	32
Educational studies [electronic resource]	31
Peabody journal of education [electronic resource]	31
Journal of further and higher education [electronic resource]	31
History of education [electronic resource]	31
Journal of interactive learning research	31
Innovations in education and teaching international [electronic resource]	31
Contemporary educational psychology [electronic resource]	31
Journal of school psychology [electronic resource]	31
American educational research journal [electronic resource]	30

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Literacy [electronic resource]	30
Early childhood research quarterly [electronic resource]	30
Journal of vocational education & training [electronic resource]	30
Christian higher education [electronic resource]	30
Research and practice for persons with severe disabilities	30
Comparative education [electronic resource]	29
Journal of technology and teacher education	29
New England Reading Association journal	29
International journal of sustainability in higher education [electronic resource]	29
Educational review [electronic resource]	28
Journal of research in reading [electronic resource]	28
Journal of behavioral education [electronic resource]	28
Asia-Pacific journal of teacher education [electronic resource]	28
The high school journal [electronic resource]	27
Interchange [electronic resource]	27
School leadership & management [electronic resource]	27
Learning, media & technology [electronic resource]	27
Educational psychology review [electronic resource]	27
Social psychology of education [electronic resource]	27
The Gifted child quarterly [electronic resource]	27
International journal of disability, development, and education [electronic resource]	27



<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Journal of multilingual and multicultural development	27
Journal of drug education	26
British journal of guidance & counseling [electronic resource]	26
Education and information technologies [electronic resource]	26
Journal of early childhood teacher education [electronic resource]	26
International journal of leadership in education [electronic resource]	26
Anthropology & education quarterly [electronic resource]	26
Research in post-compulsory education [electronic resource]	26
Distance education [electronic resource]	26
Race, ethnicity and education [electronic resource]	25
Journal for the education of the gifted	25
Journal of special education technology	25
Journal of alcohol and drug education	24
Reading & writing quarterly [electronic resource]	24
Computers and composition [electronic resource]	24
The urban review [electronic resource]	24
Education economics [electronic resource]	24
Research papers in education [electronic resource]	23
American secondary education	23
Learning and individual differences [electronic resource]	23
Community college review [electronic resource]	23

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Quality assurance in education [electronic resource]	23
American journal of education [electronic resource]	22
British journal of educational studies [electronic resource]	22
International journal for educational and vocational guidance [electronic resource]	22
Technology, pedagogy and education [electronic resource]	22
Educational media international [electronic resource]	22
Journal of psychoeducational assessment [electronic resource]	22
European journal of teacher education [electronic resource]	22
Improving schools [electronic resource]	22
Journal of education for students placed at risk [electronic resource]	22
The Review of education, pedagogy, & cultural studies [electronic resource]	21
Computers in the schools [electronic resource]	21
Journal of developmental education	21
Journal of higher education policy and management [electronic resource]	21
Open learning [electronic resource]	21
Journal for research in mathematics education	21
The elementary school journal [electronic resource]	20
English education [electronic resource]	20
Journal of academic ethics [electronic resource]	20
Journal of career development [electronic resource]	20
Journal of multicultural counseling and development	20

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
Instructional science [electronic resource]	19
Review of educational research [electronic resource]	19
Quality in higher education [electronic resource]	19
Research & teaching in developmental education	19
Interactive learning environments [electronic resource]	18
Behavioral disorders	18
Curriculum inquiry [electronic resource]	18
English education	18
Topics in early childhood special education	18
The Journal of experimental education	17
Journal of research in international education [electronic resource]	17
Comparative education review [electronic resource]	16
Sociology of education [electronic resource]	16
The Journal of computers in mathematics and science teaching	16
Journal of early childhood literacy [electronic resource]	16
Language learning journal	16
Active learning in higher education [electronic resource]	15
Feminist teacher	15
Child language teaching and therapy [electronic resource]	15
Teaching sociology	14
Educational evaluation and policy analysis [electronic resource]	14

<b>Title</b>	<b>Number of Articles in 2007</b>
The Internet and higher education [electronic resource]	14
Studies in continuing education [electronic resource]	14
The journal of the learning sciences [electronic resource]	13
The Australian journal of education	13
Cognition and instruction [electronic resource]	12
The journal of classroom interaction	11
The Volta review	7
Educational foundations	7
Review of research in education [electronic resource]	7
Studies in science education	4

*Appendix D: Think Tank Orientations, Reports, and Citations*

**Total Think Tank Orientations, Total Reports Produced in 2007 and times cited by *Education Week* (1/1/2008-6/30/2008) and the *New York Times/Washington Post* (1/1/2007-12/31/2007)**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>EdWeek</i>	<b>Newspaper</b>
<i>Albert Shanker Institute</i>	center-left	1	1	0
<i>California Budget Project</i>	center-left	6	0	1
<i>Center for American Progress</i>	center-left	10	1	2
<i>Center on Education Policy</i>	center-left	12	9	7
<i>Education Sector</i>	center-libertarian	13	8	4
<i>Progressive Policy Institute</i>	center-libertarian	8	1	0
<i>Taxpayers for Common Sense</i>	Center-libertarian	0	0	1
<i>Brookings Institution</i>	center-right	39	1	10
<i>Common Core</i>	center-right	0	0	1
<i>Alliance for Excellent Education</i>	Centrist-advocacy	14	0	1
<i>Urban Institute</i>	centrist-advocacy	31	1	5
<i>Center for Applied Linguistics</i>	centrist-advocacy	5	1	1
<i>Center for Teaching Quality</i>	Centrist-advocacy	15	0	1
<i>Center for the Advancement of Health</i>	centrist-advocacy	2	0	1
<i>Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning</i>	centrist-advocacy	6	2	0
<i>Center for Work-Life Policy</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	0	1
<i>Cheche Konnen Center</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	1	0
<i>Children and Nature Network</i>	centrist-advocacy	2	0	1
<i>Committee for Economic Development</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	1	0
<i>Concord Consortium</i>	centrist-advocacy	4	2	0
<i>Council on Competitiveness</i>	Centrist-advocacy	0	0	1
<i>Council on Foreign Relations</i>	centrist-advocacy	2	0	1
<i>EdSource</i>	centrist-advocacy	19	2	0
<i>Education Trust</i>	centrist-advocacy	5	4	1

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>EdWeek</i>	<b>Newspaper</b>
<i>Environment and Human Health Inc.</i>	centrist-advocacy	1	0	1
<i>Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute</i>	centrist-advocacy	1	0	1
<i>Families and Work Institute</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	0	1
<i>Federation of American Scientists</i>	Centrist-advocacy	0	0	1
<i>Gulf Research Center</i>	centrist-advocacy	1	1	0
<i>High Scope</i>	centrist-advocacy	2	2	0
<i>Institute for Gulf Affairs</i>	Centrist-advocacy	0		1
<i>Insurance Institute for Highway Safety</i>	centrist-advocacy	6	0	3
<i>Joan Ganz Cooney Center</i>	centrist-advocacy	1	3	0
<i>Lincoln Institute of Land Policy</i>	centrist-advocacy	10	1	0
<i>Long Island Index</i>	centrist-advocacy	4	0	1
<i>MIND Research Institute</i>	centrist-advocacy	2	1	0
<i>National Center for Educational Accountability</i>	centrist-advocacy	3	0	1
<i>National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	0	1
<i>National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education</i>	centrist-advocacy	5	1	1
<i>National Commission on Teaching and America's Future</i>	centrist-advocacy	3	1	1
<i>Northwest Evaluation Association</i>	centrist-advocacy	59	1	1
<i>Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children</i>	centrist-advocacy	3	1	0
<i>Pew Center on the States</i>	centrist-advocacy	3	2	0
<i>Policy Center on the First Year of College</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	0	1
<i>Project Tomorrow</i>	centrist-advocacy	2	1	0
<i>Public/Private Ventures</i>	centrist-advocacy	6	1	0
<i>Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy</i>	centrist-advocacy	4	1	0
<i>Research for Action</i>	centrist-advocacy	12	1	0

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>EdWeek</i>	<b>Newspaper</b>
<i>American Textbook Council</i>	centrist-advocacy	0	1	0
<i>American Institutes for Research</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	8	4	0
<i>Carnegie Corporation</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	2	2	1
<i>Center for Governmental Research</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	3	0	1
<i>Center for Public Education</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	4	1	0
<i>Child Development Policy Institute</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	16	1	0
<i>Child Trends Research Center</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	63	3	1
<i>Cochrane Collaboration</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	72	0	1
<i>Community Training and Assistance Center</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	1	1	0
<i>Council for Aid to Education</i>	Centrist-nonadvocacy	1	0	1
<i>Education Commission of the States</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	8	6	0
<i>Educational Policy Institute</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	6	1	0
<i>Educational Research Service</i>	Centrist-nonadvocacy	13	0	3
<i>Haskins Laboratories</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	1	0	1
<i>MDRC</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	9	2	0
<i>National Center for Higher Education Management Systems</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	7	1	0
<i>National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	13	2	0
<i>National Institute for Educational Policy Research Tokyo</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	0	1	0
<i>Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	0	0	1
<i>Pew Hispanic Center</i>	Centrist-nonadvocacy	2	0	1
<i>Pew Internet and American Life Project</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	6	1	0
<i>Pew Research Center</i>	Centrist-nonadvocacy	28		1
<i>Pew Research Center for the People and the Press</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	7	0	1
<i>Public Agenda</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	2	4	0
<i>Rand</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	14	7	3

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>EdWeek</i>	<b>Newspaper</b>
<i>Social Policy and Health Economics Research and Evaluation</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	0	1	0
<i>SRI International</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	48	1	0
<i>WestEd</i>	centrist-nonadvocacy	21	2	1
<i>American Enterprise Institute</i>	conservative	9	3	2
<i>American Legislative Exchange Council</i>	conservative	2	2	0
<i>Center for Equal Opportunity</i>	conservative	0	0	1
<i>Ethics and Public Policy Center</i>	conservative	1	0	1
<i>Evergreen Freedom Foundation</i>	conservative	0	1	0
<i>Fordham</i>	conservative	10	8	5
<i>Goldwater</i>	conservative	5	1	0
<i>Heritage Foundation</i>	conservative	15		1
<i>Hudson Institute</i>	conservative	0	0	2
<i>Intercollegiate Studies Institute</i>	conservative	3	0	2
<i>Lexington Institute</i>	conservative	3	1	0
<i>Manhattan Institute</i>	conservative	4	1	2
<i>Medical Institute for Sexual Health</i>	conservative	0	0	2
<i>Hoover Institution</i>	conservative	3	2	0
<i>National Council on Teacher Quality</i>	conservative	5	0	1
<i>SchoolChoice Wisconsin</i>	conservative-libertarian	6	1	0
<i>Cato</i>	conservative-libertarian	4	3	0
<i>Center for Education Reform</i>	conservative-libertarian	5	2	0
<i>Sagamore Institute for Policy Research</i>	conservative-libertarian	2	0	2
<i>Friedman Foundation</i>	conservative-libertarian	12	4	0
<i>Tax Foundation</i>	Conservative-libertarian	7	0	1
<i>Center on Budget and Policy Priorities<sup>1</sup></i>	progressive	38	1	1
<i>Century Foundation</i>	progressive	3	2	2
<i>Economic Policy Institute</i>	progressive	3	7	0
<i>Great Lakes Center</i>	progressive	19	1	0
<i>Growth and Justice</i>	progressive	0	1	0
<i>Institute for Public Policy Research</i>	progressive	4	0	1



<b>Organization</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>EdWeek</i>	<b>Newspaper</b>
<i>Justice Matters Institute</i>	progressive	1	0	1
<i>Justice Policy Institute</i>	progressive	3	0	1
<i>National Economic Development and Law Center</i>	progressive	1	0	1
<i>Policy Matters Ohio</i>	progressive	1	2	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>846</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>101</b>

### *Appendix E: Reports Not Cited*

#### **Additional Reports from Major Think Tanks with Research that Was Not Cited in the two Types of Publications during the Study Period**

	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<i>EdWeek</i>	<b>Newspapers</b>
American Legislative Exchange Council	conservative	1	0	0
Buckeye	Conservative-libertarian	1	0	0
Center of the American Experiment	conservative-libertarian	1	0	0
Program on Education and Policy Governance at Harvard	Centrist-libertarian	4	0	0
Wisconsin Policy Research Institute	Conservative-libertarian	1	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

### *Appendix F: Ideological Taxonomy*

#### **Taxonomy for Classifying the Ideological Orientation of Advocacy Think Tanks**

	<b>Left</b>	<b>Center</b>	<b>Right</b>
<i>Center-left</i>	X		
<i>Progressive</i>	X		
<i>Centrist-advocacy</i>		X	
<i>Center-right</i>			X
<i>Center-libertarian</i>			X
<i>Conservative-libertarian</i>			X
<i>Conservative</i>			X

### *Appendix G: Summary of Reports Cited*

**Think Tank Reports Produced in 2007 and Cited in *Education Week* and *The New York Times/Washington Post* during the Study Period**

Orientation and Number of Think Tanks	Total Reports	<i>EdWeek</i>	Newspaper
Progressive (n=10)	73	14	7
Center-left (n=4)	29	11	10
Center (n=51)	233	33	29
Center-right (n=2)	39	1	11
Center-Libertarian (n=6)	25	9	5
Conservative-libertarian (n=9)	39	10	3
Conservative (n=16)	61	19	19
Left 11% (n=14)	20% (n=102)	26%(n=25)	20% (n=17)
Center 52 % (n= 51	47% (n=233	34% (n=33)	35% (n=29)
Right 34%(n=33)	33%(n=164)	40% (n=39)	45% (n=38)
<b>TOTAL 99</b>	499	97	84

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- <sup>7</sup> Howell, W. (2008). Education policy, education research, and public opinion. In *When Research Matters* (Frederick M. Hess, Ed.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
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- Page, B., Shapiro, R., & Dempsey, G. (1987). What moves public opinion? *American Political Science Review*, 81, 23-43.
- <sup>8</sup> Howell, W. (2008). Education policy, education research, and public opinion. In *When Research Matters* (Frederick M. Hess, Ed.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press
- <sup>9</sup> Haas, E. (2007). False equivalency: Think Tank references on education in the news media. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 82, 1, pp. 63-102.
- <sup>10</sup> Weiss, C. & Singer, E. (1988). *Reporting of social science in the national news media*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation (p.230).
- Weiss and Singer's seminal study explored national TV, newspaper and news magazine coverage of all types of social science using content analyses and interviews with both the journalists who produced the stories and the scientists they covered. They found that university research was reported in 22% of newspaper stories

that focused on specific studies and 23% of stories in which social science research was an ancillary element. Government research was mentioned in 27% of study stories and 22% of ancillary stories. “Other research organizations” (including think tanks) produced the reports referred to in 14% of study stories and 17% of ancillary stories. The research sources of the remaining studies were either media-generated, categorized as “other” or unidentifiable.

While relevant, this research does little to inform the current work for two reasons. First, the broad scope of the study meant that the focus on education was minimal. In fact, just 3% of newspaper and TV coverage and 1% of news magazine coverage involved education. Second, data from the study were gathered in 1970 and 1982, when the number of advocacy-oriented think tanks was still on the rise. This shows up in statistics. In 1970, 5% of stories featuring social scientists identified the first-named scientist as affiliated with an “other research organizations. By 1982, 8% of first-named social scientists were affiliated with such research organizations. The increase was even more dramatic for social scientists named second in stories. The percentage of social scientists affiliated with research organizations other than universities increases from 4% in 1970 to 17% in 1982. Had the study been conducted later in the 80s or even in the 90s, I suspect that gain would have been even greater. For example, the Fordham Institute, a major producer of advocacy-oriented education research, did not even set up shop in Washington until 1996.

No subsequent research studies have replicated the Weiss and Singer study or focused more closely on education research.

<sup>11</sup> The study’s findings were based upon survey responses from 287 experts, including policymakers and academics.

<sup>12</sup> *Education Next* is published by the Hoover Institution; *The Gadfly* is published by the Fordham Institute; and *Eduwonk* is published by Education Sector. Education Trust, it should be noted, is also a think tank.

<sup>13</sup> [www.edweek.org](http://www.edweek.org) Retrieved Nov. 22, 2008, from <http://www.edweek.org/info/about/>

*Education Week* is a 26-year-old national, non-profit publication that describes itself as “America’s education newspaper of record.” The periodical’s 44 annual issues had 46,672 paid subscribers in 2007, according to preliminary figures listed on the Audit Bureau of Circulation’s web site. According to the publication’s website, the mission of the non-profit group that publishes *Education Week* is to “help raise the level of awareness and understanding among professionals and the public of important issues in American education.” For this reason, *Education Week* publishes a great deal more educational research than more mainstream (non-trade) publications.

<sup>14</sup> *The New York Times* (circulation 1.02 million) covers quite a lot of research. In 1982, Weiss and Singer found that the *Times* had the highest per capita coverage of social science in 1982 of any of the national news outlets they studied. Weiss, C. & Singer, E. (1988). *Reporting of social science in the national news media*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>15</sup> According to its website, the *Post*’s circulation is 740,000. Retrieved November 25, 2008, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. & Livingston, S. (2007) *When the press fails: Political power and the news media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>17</sup> Haas, E. (2007). False equivalency: Think Tank references on education in the news media. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 82, 1, pp. 63-102.

Although Haas’s focus was narrower than that taken here, in that he was only interested in think tank studies, the current study had the same general goal of identifying representations of educational research in the news media. For this reason, his search terminology was relevant. Haas explored 13 main search terms. The two most fruitful were “study” (142 hits) and “report” (100 hits). There was a steep drop-off for the next most fruitful term, which was “book” (16 hits). The current research used the terms “study” and “report.”

<sup>18</sup> The current study interpreted “specific research” fairly liberally to mean either references to particular studies or the provision of specific facts or statistics that had obviously been obtained via research. The scope of these studies was fairly broad and included references, for instance, to research on autism and youth suicide in addition to research conducted in schools or on school policies.

- <sup>19</sup> A limitation of this study concerned the lack of time and resources to determine whether other coders would have produced the same categorizations.
- <sup>20</sup> The web sites for *Education Week* and *The New York Times* were searched for articles, since a publication's own site seemed likely to have the most complete index of their respective articles. However, because the cost to access *The Washington Post* archives was prohibitive, its articles were obtained through ProQuest, which the newspaper indicates it uses to archive its articles.
- <sup>21</sup> The different and non-overlapping periods of time for the searches could potentially have influenced the results. For instance, the Presidential election was at the primary stage during the period analyzed for the daily newspapers, while it was starting to focus on the general election during the period analyzed for *Education Week*. However, given that education research and policy making often has a state-level focus and tends to be on-going throughout the calendar year, and given the relatively extensive periods of time analyzed, these differences may have had only a minimal effect on the findings.
- <sup>22</sup> Between January 1 and June 30 of 2008, the search terms "study" or "report" appeared in 515 *Education Week* articles. Of these, 399, or 77%, were relevant. (Most of the irrelevant references used "study" to refer to the act of studying in school.) In addition to news articles, commentaries and letters-to-the-editor that referenced specific research studies were coded. Due to the volume of references, on-line chats or blogs were not included. For *The New York Times*, "study or report" were searched and got 942 hits, 15% (146) of which referred to education or youth-related studies that directly referenced some sort of institutionally affiliated research studies. As with *Education Week*, opinion pieces were included in the results but not on-line chats or blogs. For *The Washington Post* during the same time period, because so many stories end with the phrase that so-and-so "contributed to this report," the search was narrowed by adding keyword topics. ("Study or report" alone generated more than 5,000 hits.) In combination with "study or report," topics used were "children and youth," "education" "student" or "school." These generated 1,016 articles. Of those, 31% (319) contained references to education-related studies or reports.
- <sup>23</sup> In addition, it would be a herculean if not impossible task to estimate the total number of research reports produced annually by international, federal, state and local governmental entities.
- <sup>24</sup> Given the necessary assumptions involved about the ranges of published studies, governmental sources are not included in this second analysis.
- <sup>25</sup> A decision was made to count think tank reports produced during the calendar year 2007 because think tank reports do not always contain precise release dates but do, generally, mention the year in which they were released. So, determining whether a report had been released in the first six months of 2008 was in some cases impossible. This is a limitation to the study.
- <sup>26</sup> These reports were recorded by doctoral student Wendy Chi, working for the Think Tank Review Project.
- <sup>27</sup> In 2008, AERA accepted 5692 individual submissions and 593 symposiums. Symposiums are groups of work that are typically scheduled for 90-minute slots. A review of the 2008 program revealed that three to five papers were scheduled per 90-minute session. The mean (four) was multiplied by 593 to get 2372 individual works. Adding this to 5692 produced a total of 8064 studies.
- <sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Dolny, M. (2008). *The Incredible Shrinking Think Tank: Third year in a row of declining citations*. New York, NY: Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Advocacy' versus 'non-advocacy' was sometimes difficult, given that any given study is probably intended to influence policy discussions. In this study, the key question was whether the organization had a clear goal of pushing policy in a given direction on one of more key issues. The category of "center-libertarian," which some also define as "neo-liberal," illustrates the difficulty in pinning down the political-spectrum labels. Center-libertarians often have a stated interest in equity issues, which arguably places them on the left, while their specific, market-oriented policy prescriptions place them on the right. In this study, the focus is on the policies being advocated.
- <sup>30</sup> Bennett, W. L. (2005) *News: The politics of illusion, Sixth edition*. New York: Pearson Longman.

Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. & Livingston, S. (2007) *When the press fails: Political power and the news media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Gans, H. (2004) *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

<sup>31</sup> There is strong evidence that no matter which name it goes by, the vast majority of journalists subscribe to an “ideal of objectivity.” Similarly, Weiss and Singer found that journalists and their editors generally lack the knowledge necessary to judge a study’s methodological soundness and, as a proxy, often rely instead on the reputation of the research producer. This reliance on reputation is evident in the citation of university research. The universities most frequently cited by the newspapers were Harvard and Columbia, both Ivy League institutions with prominent reputations not just among academics but among the general public. (Weiss and Singer also found that these were the top undergraduate and graduate alma maters for the national, elite media reporters they studied.) Similarly, *Education Week* reporters were most likely to cite studies produced by Harvard and by Stanford, which are, again, universities highly esteemed by the general public.

<sup>32</sup> Henig, J. (2008). *Spin cycle: How research is used in policy debates: The case of charter schools*. New York: The Russell Sage Foundation and the Century Foundation.

<sup>33</sup> Weiss, C. & Singer, E. (1988). *Reporting of social science in the national news media*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>34</sup> Weiss, C. & Singer, E. (1988). *Reporting of social science in the national news media*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. P. 25

<sup>35</sup> Weiss, C. & Singer, E. (1988). *Reporting of social science in the national news media*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>36</sup> Rich, A. (2004). *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Dolny, M. (2008). *The Incredible Shrinking Think Tank: Third year in a row of declining citations*. New York, NY: Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

<sup>37</sup> Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.