

Facts in Education: The News Media's Influence on Public Perceptions of Educational Research

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The news media are in the influential position of being educators of the public (whose opinions ultimately determine policy outcomes). This paper reports on the work of Facts in Education (FiE), a non-partisan project that aims to keep the news media accountable through addressing articles reporting erroneous facts about education. The work of FiE is demonstrative of both the potential and limits of an organized effort to correct errors in the news media's reporting of education. Moreover, it prompts critical discussion about the role of the news media in shaping public policy and opinion on education issues, in terms of whether, how, and the extent to which the news media should be accountable to providing the public with correct information.

Introduction

The news media¹ are a key shaper of beliefs and choices of citizens, and therefore serve as public educators on political issues that require deliberation. In John Dewey's words, "a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated" (1944, p.87). Since news reading is a predictor of knowledge about policy issues (Chafee & Frank, 1996, p.52; Weiss & Singer, 1988), it is critical that news media are held accountable to providing the public with sufficient information to enable effective engagement with public policy discourse, instead of misleading public opinion with one-sided, selective, or sensationalized information.

There is much public dissatisfaction with media coverage in virtually every policy area, including education. In fact, studies have shown that educators' complaints about the excessively negative, sensationalistic, or just plain wrong coverage of education are well-founded (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Thomas, 2003a, 2003b; Cohen, 2010; Keogh & Garrick, 2011; Tamir & Davidson, 2011).

This paper discusses a project called, 'Facts in Education,' (FiE) a non-partisan panel of experts which works 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. It is not affiliated with any particular position, opinion or organization, and respects the right of commentators to hold their own views and opinions. Consequently, the panel does not take issue with the expression of opinion, but rather, articles that are inconsistent with the

¹ In this paper, the 'news media' refers to print media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and news articles), rather than radio or television broadcasts—in both hardcopy and electronic (online) form. Hereafter, the "news media" refers to a broad definition of print media, which includes dailies, weeklies, and special purpose publications.

available research evidence. The work of FiE is demonstrative of both the potential and limits of an organized effort to correct errors in the news media's reporting of education. Moreover, it prompts critical discussion about the role of the news media in shaping public policy and opinion on education issues, in terms of whether, how, and the extent to which the news media should be held accountable to providing the public with correct information.

Ultimately, the objective of FiE is to contribute to bridging the gap between research and policy, part of efforts we call knowledge mobilization (KMb). Given their level of influence over shaping public opinion, the news media are in a unique position to mobilize knowledge and information on education issues based on substantive research. In light of the project's endeavours, the literature review discusses the potential role of the news media as a knowledge mobilization (KMb) intermediary in disseminating credible, research-informed education news to the public.

Literature Review

Influence on Public Policy & Opinion

Because policymakers and the public obtain most information on public policy issues from media outlets, the news media are in the influential position of being educators of the public (whose opinions will ultimately determine policy outcomes). Ultimately, the ways in which the news media communicate (or do not communicate) information could have a significant influence over public policy development. Although there are diverse perspectives on *the extent to which* the news media influences public policy and opinion, substantive research evidence shows that it does have a significant effect on both (Cohen, 1963; Dreier, 2005; Gerstl-Pepin, 2002; Haas, 2007; Jamieson, 2003).

If the purpose of the news media is, in large part, “to inform,” the public on current events and political/policy issues that will affect them, it is critical that information given to the public is consistent with the best available evidence to increase accurate public understanding on policy debates.

The purpose of this literature review is to illustrate the critical role of the news media in efforts to increase the use of research in public policy development. In order to do this, there will be brief discussions of the role of research diffusion in KMb, communication theory, the news media’s influence on public policy and opinion, as well as their sources of information.

Knowledge Mobilization (KMb): Disseminating Research to Inform Public Policy

In education, the substantial gap between research, policy and practice is frequently criticized (Mitton et al., 2007; Hess, 2007; Hargreaves, 1999; Levin, 2009, 2010). Increasing recognition of the importance of evidence-informed policy and practice has led to greater efforts to establish stronger linkages between research, policy and practice (Levin, 2010; Nutley et al., 2007).

According to Nutley et al. (2007), research use is generally perceived to be the application of research directly to policy and practice decisions. If this were the case, policy options and strategic directions would be chosen and established based on research. In reality, however, the role of research in policy development tends to be substantially more subtle and indirect. Knowledge, understanding and attitudes, for example, can be influenced by research, thereby impacting decision making in a different—but perhaps equally important—way. Generally speaking, research is used for conceptual rather than instrumental purposes when it comes to public policy development, as the perception is that it tends to inform rather than

provide a clear direction for action (Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2003; Reid, 2003). When public policymakers engage in the process of research, it can lead to changes in thinking, attitude and behavior. According to Shulha and Cousins (1997), this ‘process learning,’ can result in improved collaboration between those involved in the policy process, and can affect the design or results of the program being evaluated. Involving stakeholders in conducting research can contribute to the long-term effects of process learning, along with the potentially enduring effects research can have on policy. Research, as defined by Davies and Nutley (2008), includes “research findings, evidence, and... theoretical and empirical insights to inform decision-making” (p.2). The impact of research can be particularly strong when it is based on a strong body of evidence established over time (Levin, 2008).

Education and other social science academics are concerned that think tank reports (which do not typically adhere to the same rigorous review standards as academic peer-reviewed papers) are more widely distributed by the news media than peer-reviewed academic research, and as a result, have a greater influence on public policy (Yettick, 2011). Little is known about *why* journalists and reporters may choose to use and consequently disseminate certain sources of information, but some theories on the spread of ideas as well as communication theory contribute to an understanding of why the news media might disseminate certain sources of information/research evidence over others.

Research Dissemination

The concept of research ‘utilization’ is complex in and of itself. Through the analyses of empirical studies, for example, Walter et al. (2003) discovered multiple forms of impact, including: “changes in access to research, changes in the context to which research is considered,

referred to or read, citations in documents, changes in knowledge and understanding, changes in attitudes and beliefs, and changes in behavior” (p.11). Each of these could be considered to be the ‘use’ of research, but each could lead to different impacts with different implications for public policy and practice—in all realms of public service, and specifically in education. Since it is apparent that dissemination positively influences the use of knowledge, greater efforts to disseminate knowledge could lead to increased utilization (Knott and Wilavsky, 1980).

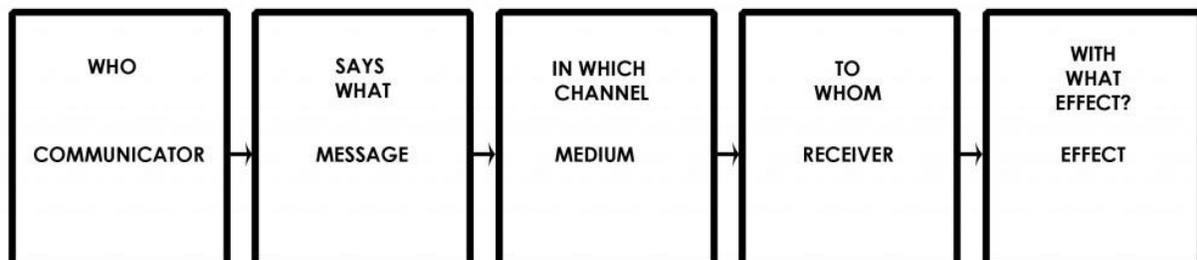
Knott and Wildavsky’s (1980) dissemination model describes knowledge utilization as being contingent upon the research content, findings, and efforts to disseminate. It proposes that along with research activities, dissemination mechanisms should be implemented in order to identify relevant and practical knowledge, transferring it to potential users. This model purports that dissemination happens when the prospective user gains awareness of the research findings. Here, knowledge utilization occurs through both the results of the research and the dissemination effort, but since research is rarely disseminated widely, it has modest impact (MacLean, 1996). The key weakness of this model is thus the lack of involvement of users in the production and selection of applicable research (Landry et al., 2001).

In response to the shortcomings of the other three models, the interaction model was created (Knott and Wildavsky, 1980; Dunn, 1980; Yin and Moore, 1988; Huberman and Thurler, 1991; Nyden and Wiewell, 1992; Oh, 1997). Rather than a direct progression that begins either with user or producer needs, this model describes knowledge utilization as being determined by the complex relations and dynamics between the two groups. Proponents of this relationship-focused model believe that strong, long-term linkages between producers and users of knowledge will lead to higher levels of utilization. The interaction model is now, in various incarnations, the most prominent theory to explain the ways in which research is used. The news

media could potentially play multiple roles in this interaction in various forms and feedback loops: as disseminator and user (journalists and reports ‘use’ research evidence to inform their work, which is ultimately disseminated).

Communication Theory and Public Policy

Laswell’s (1972) assertion that there is a need for more in-depth investigation and reporting on how information is flowed into public policymaking remains a critical issue in current times. His taxonomy of communication is still widely used and provides a basic foundation of the process of communication and its societal function (informed by Aristotle’s model of communication):



(Lasswell, 1948, p.37)

The news media plays a key part in every aspect of the process, particularly as the medium, but also in terms of the “message” that is disseminated to the audience. Laswell (1948) examined the “science of communication,” or, the processes, outcomes and effects of collecting, manipulating and transmitting information on different audiences (Laswell, 1946, 1948). In recent decades, the news media’s influence over public opinion in the policy arena has been affected—arguably in

new ways—by the availability of information online (Levin, 2013). Some would say the level of influence has been reduced, with studies demonstrating that TV viewing and newspaper reading has been declining (knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/sixty-years-declining-circulation-suggests-newspapers-will-perish-says-report; stateofthedia.org/2012/newspapers-building-digital-revenues-proves-painfully-slow/; www.nytimes.com/2012/04/23/business/media/tv-viewers-are-missing-in-action.html?pagewanted=all; http://208.254.39.65/ipaadvertising/e_article000827762.cfm). Other studies indicate, however, that newspaper readership is stronger than ever (<http://www.nadbank.com/en/nadbank-news/latest-study-news>). Regardless, Laswell’s science of communication model can be broadly applied in modern times to help conceptualize the news media’s role in influencing public policy decisions—with respect to news that is available across all platforms (print; personal computers, smart phones, tablets, etc.).

Laswell emphasized the importance of the news media’s role in disseminating information that fit a criterion of “dependability;” or, in other words, “credibility.” Information was deemed credible, if the claims were based on the best available evidence (Laswell, 1948). Positioned in the middle group in Laswell’s communication model are “editors and journalists,” who he refers to as “controllers.” He identified journalists and reporters as policy-oriented communicators, in terms of their agenda for reporting as well as target audience. They are in the critical position of being a powerful informant of public policy and opinion, through controlling policy-relevant information. They choose the sources of information, and control the way it is framed. In this sense, the news media serve as intermediaries, as they are ‘channels’ through which research is disseminated to inform public policy and opinion (Auer, 2011, p. 714).

The Role of the News Media in Research Dissemination: Shaping Public Policy and Opinion

The News Media as a Knowledge Intermediary

Since the news media is in a position as an influential shaper of public policy and opinion, there is potential to be a significant and effective intermediary by which to ensure that public opinion and ultimately policy are informed by research evidence. The term, “intermediary,” has diverse definitions in the literature, and often used interchangeably with other terms, including: third-party organization/agency, facilitator and knowledge broker. Although there are inconsistencies in terminology and definition, Honig (2004) provides a comprehensive explanation of intermediaries, which can be used to understand their general roles and functions. In sum, the author describes intermediaries as being independent organizations that mediate and/or manage change between two other parties (e.g. researchers and research users). Intermediary organizations serve functions that the other parties do not have the capacity to serve on their own, while at the same time, they must rely on each party to enable them to function in their role.

The news media are a kind of intermediary in their own right serving as third parties that disseminate research findings and expert opinion to the public, including policymakers and practitioners. The news media is in the unique position of being the primary source of information about social policy issues to the majority of the public. According to a 2012 study by the Newspaper Audience Databank Inc. (<http://www.nadbank.com/en/nadbank-news/latest-study-news>), 78% of Canadian adults read a daily newspaper or visit a newspaper website each

week, across all platforms. Given its level of influence, it is critical that the information provided by the news media is “dependable,” or in other words, based on the best available evidence.

Moses (2007) makes the case for the news media basing policy articles on academic research rather than advocacy-oriented think tanks, as this will facilitate autonomous deliberation among citizens, thereby fostering a democratic society. Autonomous deliberation, as defined by Moses, is:

Decision-making thoughts and processes by individual citizens that are not coerced, but informed in a meaningful way, so that citizens are able to engage meaningfully with competing claims, values, and arguments concerning moral and political disagreements before making an informed decision and voting (p. 158).

From this perspective, the news media have the responsibility of informing citizens so that they are in the position to exercise autonomous deliberation that is based on a “dependable” knowledge of policy issues. Certainly, factors such as the political and economic climate and agenda, have major implications for the news that is covered, as well as whose voices are heard and what information is communicated (Alterman, 2003, Galindo, 1997). Furthermore, profit motives, limited time and allocated space, as well as other factors can contribute to the news media not representing policy issues in their proper contexts, and neglecting to ensure their information is based on the best available evidence (Moses, 2007; Alterman, 2003). If the news media can effectively use appropriate academic research to inform their communication on policy issues, they are more likely to contribute to a well-informed public on critical issues such as education.

In education, for example, public perception of educational issues as “social problems” in need of extra resources seems, in part, to depend on the degree of attention allocated to education by the news media (Haas, 2007). Public opinion is also influenced by the ways in which educational issues and strategies to address them are framed in the reporting. Consequently,

resources allocated to social policy areas such as education are largely contingent upon the public's opinion of them, instead of what might be seen as the "objective breadth and depth of problematic conditions in society" (Haas, 2007, p. 64).

The news media's depictions of social policy issues demonstrate the interconnected relationship between the ways in which the news media understands the issues and how the public perceives them. It cannot be assumed that the news media's conceptions and reporting of the issues will be representative of the current research, or substantive, high quality empirical studies (Haas, 2007; Weiss & Singer, 1988).²

Furthermore, who and what the news media portray as expert or reliable sources of information has a significant influence on public perceptions of credible sources and research, given the persistently high levels of newspaper readership today (as indicated by the NADI study: <http://www.nadbank.com/en/nadbank-news/latest-study-news>). The effect is that the news media influence the public's perceptions regarding: 1) who/what the credible sources of research are; 2) what issues to prioritize; and 3) where to best allocate resources to address them (Haas, 2007).

Empirical Evidence in the New Media

Some studies indicate that expert and empirical research evidence in the news media play a role in shaping public perceptions and knowledge (Haas, 2007; Page et al., 1987; van Dijk, 1998). Most significantly, news articles can influence the way the public understands specific educational issues and strategies by presenting them as being backed by empirical evidence.

According to Page et al. (1987), experts are particularly influential with respect to public opinion

² While the debate about what counts as 'good' or 'high quality' research is a critical component of the discussion, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

on policy issues, as they are seen to have high credibility—whether this can be attributed to portrayed or genuine experience and knowledge. This is an issue of concern, however, because the general public is not necessarily able to discern the credibility of the ‘expert’ opinion; especially when there are complex technical issues to be considered that will impact the merits of policy alternatives (p.35).

In education, academics do not effectively disseminate research to inform public policy discourse, as they typically rely on scholarly publications to disseminate research—even if the target audience is intended to be policymakers and practitioners (Moses, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Smith et al., 2004). Moreover, there is a tendency for journalists to seek evidence for policy information from think tank reports, which are not necessarily based on quality research (Haas, 2007).

Haas’ (2007) study examines the ways in which information and research on education is used by the news media. The findings show that the news media represented four different types of think tanks (contract research, academic, advocacy, and mixed academic and advocacy) as sources of research and credible information, in spite of the fact that each think tank emphasized policy and political advocacy more than the professional norms of academic research, to varying degrees.

Sources of Information

When ‘expert’ sources are selected by the news media, they are typically chosen based on expediency rather than rigorous research standards (Haas, 2004; 2007; Rich and Weaver, 2000; Lieberman, 2000). The ways in which education and other research is presented by the news media is representative of how the news media understands their audience, and in turn, what is

reported. Typically, news articles reflect the general perceptions and ideologies of the public, in order to appeal to as wide an audience as possible (Allan, 1999; Cotter, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; J. Wilson, 2000). In short, the news media tend to base reports on, at least to some degree, perceptions of how the audience views particular issues.

University- Academic Research & Think Tank Reports

Public policy and opinion may be more heavily influenced by the news media than by academic research, with respect to the educational policies that high quality research supports (Haas, 2007). Ideally, the news media would increasingly utilize academic research as their source of information on policy issues. Instead, there have been growing concerns among educational and other researchers about the proliferation of think tank presence in the news media.

Yettick (2009), examined education-related news stories published in two prominent U.S. daily newspapers (the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*), as well as the influential education newspaper, *Education Week*. Although universities produce 14 to 16 times more research than think tanks, the study found that these news sources only cited university research studies twice as often as think tank reports in their education news reporting. Think tank reports were therefore significantly more likely to be mentioned than any study produced by a university. The findings from this study indicate that research from think tanks is over-represented by the news media; presumably because think tanks invest a significant amount of their efforts and resources on promoting their work. University academics—unlike think tank staff—do not usually have the resources or incentives to make connections with journalists or work on public relations. Moreover, journalists and editors typically—as with the general

population—lack the skill sets to discern the methodological robustness of research studies, so often depend on the research producer’s reputation/public image instead (Weiss & Singer, 1988). The dependence on perceived credibility is evident in the ways in which university research is cited. Weiss and Singer (1988), for example, found that the most frequently referenced universities by the news media were Harvard and Columbia—institutions with highly regarded reputations among both academics and the general public. Interestingly, Weiss and Singer also discovered that Harvard and Columbia were the top alma maters for the national, elite media reporters in their study.

Furthermore, an additional issue for consideration in terms of ‘credibility,’ is whether various perspectives are represented. This is typically not the case in advocacy-oriented think tank tanks and their reports, since their work usually reflects and supports political agendas. A plausible explanation for the disproportionate representation of think tank research could be that they tend to focus on issues of high public interest, which consequently are more likely to interest journalists. Nevertheless, questions still remain regarding whether certain issues are covered because they are inherently more news-worthy, or because it is on the agenda of think tanks that have strong capacity, skills and resources to have the news media use their research.

A major barrier to the news media’s use of university produced research is the way in which higher education institutions are structured. Academia’s tenure structure, for example, provides major incentives to those who publish in peer-reviewed journals, and typically does not encourage the dissemination of research to the general public (Yettick, 2011; Cooper et al., 2012; Qi & Levin, 2010).

Facts in Education (FiE)

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 education organizations. A list of the panel members can be found in Appendix A.

The process begins when an article ('article' here also includes items in the electronic media or even on blogs) is brought to the attention of the project coordinators or project supervisor. Articles are most often found by either members of the panel or the project coordinators. The project coordinators and the project supervisor then review the article to assess whether it would be appropriate to refer to the entire panel. If the article is deemed appropriate (because it seems to contain erroneous factual claims), the article is sent out to the panel members and feedback is solicited. Discussion among panel members then ensues. This discussion usually centers on whether the article actually contains a factual error that should be addressed, and if so, what the response of the panel should be.

FiE aims to have responses issued within 48 hours of the article being published, so the exchange and debate among panel members is often swift. If there are few or no objections among the panel, and at least eight of the 20 members agree to a response, that response is sent

to the media outlet from which the article originated. Although the response is sent on behalf of FiE, only the names of those members that specifically agreed to the response are attached. The response is then also distributed to a long list of approximately 50 education stakeholder organizations, to other key media, and posted on our blog. The stakeholder organizations include teacher unions, school boards and non-profit education organizations across Canada.

Since the panel aims to address articles about education containing factual errors and not opinion, the main criterion for whether a response will be issued by the panel is whether or not the article contains a significant factual error. This issue accounts for much of the debate that occurs internally between panel members. Some members of the panel want to respond to comments that they consider misguided, but these may not meet the test of clearly containing errors of fact. It was also the view of panel members that opinion pieces such as op-eds or those written by columnists should not be responded to at all. However, this has changed more recently and the panel now responds to any type of report in the media , provided it contains what is seen as a significant factual error, including claims that contradict the available research evidence.

Results

From December 2009 to January 2013, the FiE panel reviewed 28 articles that appeared in Canadian news media. Responses were issued to 11 of those articles; six of which were published by the originating media outlet. All 11 responses, though, were distributed to stakeholders and posted on our blog. To give an idea of some of the responses, a few of the cases where responses were made public by the media outlet will be presented.

The very first article that FiE reviewed was in the Winnipeg Free Press entitled “Charter schools yes, native-only schools no”. In the article, the author advocates the introduction of

charter schools in Winnipeg as well as other parts of Canada, and cites the apparent success they have had in the United States. The panel felt that although there were some studies showing successful outcomes for students that attend charter schools, this did not reflect the entire body of evidence. Thus the following response was issued and was signed by 12 of the 20 panel members:

This article makes the claim that, “Americans have met the challenge of closing the learning gap by increasing the standard and stimulating the evolutionary process in delivery through the charter school system.” This claim is inconsistent with the body of evidence on charter schools in the United States which clearly does not support the view that charter schools significantly and consistently outperform other schools.

The second article to which a response was published in the Toronto Star under the title “‘Class size is the biggest dead end in the world’, writer tells provincial Liberal think-tank”. The article referred to a speech by author Malcolm Gladwell in which he said “I know that from time to time there is a lot of interest in the power and importance of reducing class size but the data shows class size is the biggest dead end in the world”. He then went on to say “Even if you were to cut every class in Ontario in half, you'd improve the performance of Ontario's schoolchildren by about 5 percentile points”. While there was debate among the panel as to whether to respond given that Gladwell was speaking to be provocative and that according to one of the panel members that was in the crowd, the newspaper did not provide the full context of his remarks, ultimately it was decided that the degree of exaggeration in his claim could be damaging to public understanding and therefore a response was merited. Hence the following response was issued and was signed by 10 of the 20 panel members:

Malcolm Gladwell's reported claim on the impact of class size reduction is an unfortunate piece of hyperbole, undoubtedly intended to provoke but misleading as stated. In fact there is solid evidence that smaller classes in primary grades can have positive impacts on student outcomes if they are part of an overall plan to improve teaching practices. As a general principle and unhappily for the widespread desire for simple answers to complex questions, improving outcomes

in education requires attention to many factors, as Gladwell himself acknowledged in his address. The quality of teaching, while very important as Gladwell suggests, is not independent of the context.

The most recent article that FiE responded to was an opinion column published in the Globe and Mail entitled “Teacher unions are obsolete”. In this column, the author argues that teacher unions were obstacles to having effective school systems and were no longer necessary. At first, many members of the panel were against issuing a response as this columnist had a history of being provocative, and that responding would only seek to legitimize her writing. There was also concern that responding might make the panel seem like apologists for teacher unions. Yet eventually it was decided that if the columnist’s assertions went unchallenged, it could be a source of misinformation among the papers’ many readers. Therefore, the following response was issued and signed by 13 of the 20 panel members:

Virtually all of the high performing countries on international assessments (Japan, South Korea, Finland, Canada, Australia, Germany, New Zealand) have strong teacher unions, while others (e.g. Singapore) have very favourable salaries and working conditions for teachers. Countries with weak teacher unions and poor working conditions (e.g. the U.S.) have lower achievement levels. There is no evidence that strong teacher unions are inconsistent with high quality education.

Varied reasons account for the 17 articles that were reviewed but to which a response was not issued. In many instances, although the panel disagreed with the article, it was felt that there were not actual factual errors in the article even if the opinions given seemed wrong. In other cases, it was felt that it would be inappropriate for the panel to respond as the article was deemed to be an opinion piece. And in some instances, articles simply did not elicit enough response from panel members, perhaps because they came at times when panel members were particularly busy.

An example of an article to which a response was not issued, was one published in Walrus magazine entitled “Is it time to eliminate the middleman in public education?” In the

article, the editor of the magazine discusses the issue of school boards, their costs, and their governance. He then examines jurisdictions around the world that have eliminated their school boards, and concludes that perhaps Canadian school systems should do this as well. While members of the panel felt that there was not empirical evidence to support the author's conclusion, it was decided that this was primarily an opinion piece and did not contain any significant factual errors that could be addressed.

Discussion/Implications

In spite of the high levels of interest in the idea and purpose of FiE among education practitioners and stakeholders, we are not aware of this work being done elsewhere in Canada. While there are frequent complaints about the news media's coverage of education issues, organized efforts to work towards change is lacking.

Oftentimes, the FiE panel's initial negative reaction to a news article is based on poor framing, sensationalized or misguided opinion. Although it is troubling that this type of reporting is misleading the public on education issues, it is currently beyond the scope of the project to respond to anything other than incorrect facts—facts that are contrary to research evidence, rather than disagreement on opinions. Typically, the articles eliciting the most negative responses were written by columnists or opinion pieces, rather than actual 'news' coverage. Along the same lines, an additional issue of concern is the spreading of misinformation based on misguided opinion by the blogosphere—of course, beyond the scope of FiE, but nevertheless, cannot be ignored as a medium through which the public is informed of education issues—correctly or incorrectly. At this time, we are not certain about whether, how, and to what extent we might want to consider incorporating the blogosphere in the work of FiE in the future.

Generally, journalists were receptive to the work of FiE, based on email correspondence at the project's inception. Two of the education writers, for example, wrote that they were "interested" and "intrigued" by the project. In light of the positive response from journalists, there may be potential opportunities to work with the news media to improve the accuracy of education issues coverage using research evidence.

Marin et al. (2004) provided a few broad recommendations for academics to receive media attention on their research, for positive and effective outcomes. For example: scholars hoping to disseminate their research should be readily available for interviews and comments and able to provide timely and accessible (i.e. in terms of language and relevance) information and responses to journalists; they should be proactive about connecting their work to what is currently being discussed in the news (e.g. sending press releases, pitching stories to reporters, holding press conferences, etc.); and they should ensure that reporters understand their work well, to mitigate against misrepresentation or distortion.

Such endeavours will certainly be challenging, in view of the competing demands of academia and university reward structures (Moses, 2007; Cooper et al., 2012; Yettick, 2011), but necessary, in order for scholarly research to be disseminated beyond academia to reach the public via the news media.

Conclusion

As Dyson (2003) put it, "knowledge must be turned to social benefit if [academics] are to justify the faith placed in us" (p.12).

Given how important it is for public policy to be informed by credible research (including the representation of all aspects of the story/issue), and the news media's role as a key informant of public policy and opinion, the news media has the potential to be an important intermediary in

the knowledge mobilization process through their use of research. In the endeavour to increase the use of research for more effective public policies, the news media has a responsibility as an educator of the public to communicate 'dependable' information. Academics can facilitate the news media's use of credible research by making efforts to provide accessible and relevant research, and being available to respond to news media inquiries. In light of the fact that think tank reports are more frequently cited by the news media than academic studies, it is clear that there is much work to be done, if the news media is to be an effective disseminator of credible, fairly represented research.

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APPENDIX A

The Facts in Education Panelists (for panelist bios, please visit http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/rspe/Facts_in_Education/Facts_in_Education_Panel.html):

- Ruth Baumann, Chair, Curriculum Council for the Ontario Ministry of Education
- Harold Braithwaite, Executive Director, The Retired Teachers of Ontario
- Ron Canuel, CEO, Canadian Education Association
- Gerry Connelly, Co-Director, Education Sustainability Development Academy, York University
- Lorna Earl, President of the International Congress of School Effectiveness and School Improvement
- Sue Ferguson, Coordinator, The Learning Consortium, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Michael Fullan, Special Policy Adviser in Education to the Premier of Ontario
- Kathleen Gallagher, Professor and Canada Research Chair, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Jane Gaskell, Professor and Former Dean, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Avis Glaze, President, Edu-quest International
- Joan Green, Former Director of Education, Founding CEO of EQAO, International Consultant
- Sue Herbert, former Ontario Deputy Minister of Education
- Bill Hogarth, retired Director of Education, Education Consultant
- Ken Leithwood, Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Ben Levin, Professor and Canada Research Chair, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Penny Milton, former CEO, Canadian Education Association
- Karen Mundy, Professor and Canada Research Chair, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Charles Pascal, Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Jim Slotta, Professor and Canada Research Chair, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
- Charles Ungerleider, Professor, University of British Columbia