Special Issue Article- Promoting and Limiting Voice: The Influence of Web-Based Platforms on Public Policy Discourse in Urban Centers

E-Advocacy in the Information Market: How Social Media Platforms Distribute Evidence on Charter Schools

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Abstract
A growing body of research investigates how intermediary organizations (IOs) and their networks navigate, promote, and produce evidence on social media. To date, scholars have underexplored blogs, an important milieu in which IOs produce and disseminate information. In this analysis, we broaden the emerging scholarship on evidence brokering by examining how IOs and individual and independent bloggers broker knowledge via education policy blogs on charter schools and related education policy. Although blogging can potentially enhance knowledge production and dissemination, our findings demonstrate that bloggers often promote research evidence of uneven quality and scientific rigor.

Keywords
evidence use, intermediary organizations, charter schools

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Education policymakers have long sought research and evidence to inform decisions on how to improve America's public schools. For example, the research of psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark demonstrated that segregation harms children and significantly informed the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that segregated schools are unconstitutional (Kluger, 1976). More recently, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) demanded that states and localities demonstrate that funds are directed toward reforms supported by "scientifically-based research," spurring demand for research and evaluation that would examine the effectiveness of reforms (Feuer et al., 2002). In 2009, the Obama Administration elevated this demand for research through its landmark education initiative, Race to the Top, which awarded federal funds to states and local education agencies with a demonstrated commitment to instituting evidence-based reforms and continually evaluating their impact (Haskins & Margolis, 2014). This federal imperative for evidence was further asserted in 2015 with the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (Fleischman et al., 2016).

Despite a demand for sound evidence among policymakers, the application of research to policymaking is complex and indirect. Instead, research evidence is often deployed in a politicized and diffused manner, as special interest groups seek to promote evidence that supports their agendas or ideological positions (Finnigan & Daly, 2014; Henig, 2009; Lubienski et al., 2014; Rich, 2001). Furthermore, evidence increasingly emanates from a complex institutional terrain of intermediary organization (IO) networks, which include foundations, think tanks, advocacy groups, and charter school industry groups. As a result, around many specific policy issues where the evidence on effects is unsettled, such as charter schools, for example, experts who adhere to the standards of empirical research are not the sole producers of evidence shaping public policy debates and decisions. Indeed, among the most influential voices in contemporary education policy debates are those emanating from intermediary organizations, which "are established to fill a key function in brokering evidence in support of scientific agendas" (Lubienski et al., 2011, p. 2). The vast landscape of IOs includes think tanks, advocacy organizations, and philanthropic groups, many of which possess the political and financial resources necessary to selectively promote, package, and translate existing research to policymakers, as well as to produce original research in support of their agendas (Lubienski et al., 2016; Scott & Jabbar, 2013). IOs tend to converse within an "echo chamber" and cite similar evidence repeatedly in support of their favored reform agendas, without necessarily interrogating the research quality (Lubienski et al., 2009). Often, IOs take on a "hub and spoke" character, wherein venture philanthropists (i.e., foundations) seed, facilitate, manage, and broker resources, funds, ideology, and research in a larger network of

think tanks, media actors, advocacy organizations, and research centers (Scott & Jabbar, 2014). In this context, public understandings of what "counts" as evidence and expertise have broadened considerably beyond the university-based academic researcher. Indeed, as the landscape of knowledge producers expands, university researchers essentially compete with IOs in communicating evidence to policymakers, yet often lack the resources and marketing skills common among IOs (Lubienski et al., 2011).

Against this backdrop, IOs actively promote research in support of "incentivist" policies as evidence-based reforms. These policies operate under the assumption that incentives encourage desirable outcomes, and include those facilitating the expansion of school choice, such as charter schools and opportunity scholarships (i.e., vouchers); merit pay for teachers; and so-called "Parent Trigger" laws, which are state laws that enable parents to either close a public school or to advocate for the school's conversion to a charter school. Proponents suggest that incentivist policies push education systems and actors to act in response to market demands, which thereby leads to healthier and more responsive school markets (Lubienski et al., 2011). In broadly disseminating evidence to support the "scaling up" of incentivist policies, IOs and their networks demonstrate that they are an integral part of the advancement of such initiatives, which have rapidly taken hold across many urban school districts in United States (Scott et al., 2017).

However, a vast body of empirical work, largely produced by academic researchers, reveals less positive outcomes from incentivist reforms. For example, charter schools (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010), opportunity scholarships (DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007; Moe, 2008), merit pay (Lavy, 2007; Marsh et al., 2012; Sojourner et al., 2014), and Parent Trigger laws (Rogers et al., 2015; Smith & Rowland, 2014) are associated with poor educational outcomes for some participants and proliferate based upon unsettled empirical work (Southerland et al., 2014). Research also suggests that the intense racial politics and marketing efforts (DiMartino & Jessen, 2018; Scott & Holme, 2016) that foreground incentivist reforms and associated advocacy efforts exacerbate existing asymmetrical access to information and resources among parents (Andre-Bechely, 2013) and fracture educational coalitions within communities of color in places like New Orleans (Dixson et al., 2015), home of the "nation's biggest experiment in school choice" (Banchero, 2013). This research, together with evidence that finds more positive outcomes from choice and incentivist reforms, leads to a climate in which education advocacy and reform networks attempt to promote their interpretation of the conflicting research findings to policymakers, funders, and the general public.

IOs draw upon Web-based social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, to promote their organizational and advocacy goals, and this use

often operates within siloed "echo chambers" of like-minded organizational networks. Recent studies suggest that the evidence and discourse leveraged in these Web-based platforms increasingly inform perspectives of both policymakers and other key members of IO networks on incentivist policies (DeBray et al., 2014; Goldie et al., 2014; Lubienski et al., 2014; Malin & Lubienski, 2015). In distributing evidence via social media, IOs bypass the lengthy peer-review process that characterizes most academic research and thus reach a wide readership relatively quickly. Furthermore, the immediacy with which one can share knowledge via social media encourages and enables social media users to engage directly in conversation with one another (Supovitz et al., 2018; Wang & Filkis, 2019). Thus, social media presents an attractive channel for IOs who wish to reach policymakers, other members in their network, and a broader audience. Research on this phenomenon is burgeoning and drawing upon innovative methodologies. For example, researchers used bibliometrics to examine the presence of an "echo chamber" among Twitter users engaged in charter school debates (Goldie et al., 2014). In addition, researchers have used social network analysis to investigate Twitter-based knowledge circulation regarding the Common Core State Standards (Supovitz et al., 2018; Wang & Filkis, 2019).

This burgeoning body of research illuminates the need to further understand how intermediary organizations and their networks navigate, promote, and produce evidence on social media. However, to date, scholars have underexplored blogs, an important milieu in which IOs produce and disseminate information. Blogs, as a part of the social media landscape, are a key source of data on how advocacy and reform networks produce and promote evidence on education policies. An abbreviation for "web-log," a blog is a website on which individual or multiple users can post various forms of media, including text, photographs, and videos. The most prolific bloggers publish new posts daily, or even multiple times per day, on their respective blogs. Because most blog-hosting websites are free or low-cost, and are available to anybody with Internet access, blogs, unlike traditional media platforms, such as print newspapers and television, allow virtually anybody with a point of view to publish for an audience. Education advocacy groups and networks, online journals (e.g., *Education Week* and *The Huffington Post*), activists, parents, educators, and academics are engaging in what we term "e-advocacy," promoting and disseminating evidence via their blogs.

Purpose

In this analysis, we seek to broaden the emerging scholarship on evidence brokering via new forms of electronic media. We examine how IOs and individual and independent bloggers broker knowledge via education policy

blogs on charter schools and related education policy. Our analysis is centered on three questions: (a) What are the characteristics of the education policy bloggers network? (b) What are bloggers' perceptions of the role of evidence in education policymaking? and (c) How do bloggers use evidence in their commentary on incentivist policy?

We discuss our findings across four sections. First, we describe our conceptual approach. Second, we present our multi-method research design. Third, we present our findings on the characteristics of the blogosphere, how bloggers use evidence, and the impact of the education bloggers' network. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for understanding the role of networks in evidence use, and on the supply and demand of evidence in the IO sector and in education policymaking.

Conceptual Approach

Our research draws from and connects insights from three conceptual frameworks. We deploy elements of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF, Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999), the politics of policy networks (Ball & Junemann, 2012), and the emergence of Intermediary Organization Networks (IONs) as working not only in terms of their form, but also in terms of functions that result in private organizations often assuming roles as de facto public policy makers (DeBray et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015, 2017).

Departing from the notion that policy actors act in a static "iron triangle" comprising administrative agencies, legislative committees, and interest groups, the ACF assumes that advocacy coalitions comprise a range of governmental and non-governmental actors. These actors are united in their beliefs and act in coordination in policy "subsystems" to translate their beliefs into policy outcomes (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Alongside these new subsystems come new forms of information use and research utilization (James & Jorgensen, 2009). Hence, ACF enables an investigation of how researchers, journalists, policymakers, and advocates together engage in formulating, disseminating, evaluating, and implementing policy ideas.

We complement our use of ACF with conceptual literature on policy networks, a "descriptive and analytical term that refers to a form of governance that interweaves and interrelates markets and hierarchies—a kind of messy hinterland that supplements and sometimes subverts these other forms" (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 9). Similar to the notion of advocacy coalitions, policy networks bring together governmental and non-governmental actors who advance their shared policy ideas, or what Ball and Junemann term "policy discourses" (p. 9).

Drawing from these two frameworks, we argue in our prior research that intermediary organizations (IOs) operate in coordinated coalitions, or networks, to broker research evidence to policymakers and other audiences (Lubienski et al., 2011, 2014). Specifically, we demonstrate how networks of IOs, or intermediary organization networks (IONs), leverage their collective impact to broker research evidence to advance a narrative focused on the efficacy of incentivist policies and reforms (DeBray et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015, 2017). The character IONs has evolved with the increased entry of non-educators into the policy arena (Henig, 2013).

Together, our research on IONs extends theoretical scholarship on research utilization, which posits that research is often deployed to achieve political aims, including to confirm existing ideological positions or policy agendas (Lavis et al., 2003; Weiss, 1979). Specifically, our prior work reveals several insights into the research brokerage activities of IONs. For example, we found that local political, policy, and historical contexts shape ION activities in locales such as Denver, New Orleans, and New York City (DeBray et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2015, 2017). To illustrate, while oppositional anti-incentivist organizations existed, we observed Denver to have cohesive IONs in support of incentivist reforms where foundations enjoyed influential relationships with state legislators and supported IOs' research brokerage activities around incentivist policies, such as charter schools and merit-pay plans. By contrast, the political contexts in New Orleans and New York City were more contentious, with some local IONs supporting incentivist policies while others firmly opposed them. This research also sheds light on the centrality of foundations to cohesive ION activity, as philanthropic organizations effectively mobilize resources both to play a key advocacy role as well as fund to the research production and promotion activities of other IOs (Scott & Jabbar, 2014). Related work highlights the global nature of some IONs, such as those comprising the alternative teacher preparation program Teach For America and its Teach For All affiliates around the world (La Londe et al., 2015). Collectively, this research illuminates IONs' political influence in advancing incentivist reforms on the local, state, national, and international levels.

To strategically broker research evidence supporting incentivist reforms, IONs often leverage web-based platforms and social media (Goldie et al., 2014; Malin & Lubienski, 2015). Research circulating among IONs via the web moves through an echo chamber, in which educators, university researchers, media, and advocacy organizations echo "evidence" through traditional and new forms of media, such as Twitter and blogs, in order to gain policy momentum (Goldie et al., 2014). However, to date, the research on IONs has not investigated the role blogs, as a particular tool for online communication, may play in IONs' research brokerage activities. Hence, this study extends

the empirical and conceptual research on IONs by illuminating how IOs within IONs use blogs to broker research evidence to advance incentivist reforms. In addition, we investigate how bloggers unaffiliated with IOs may likewise play key roles within IONs, working in tandem with ideologically-aligned IOs to promote or critique incentivist reforms.

Research Design

This analysis is part of a larger research initiative on evidence use (2011–2018). The study examines evidence brokering among IOs and policymakers toward incentivist policies, including charter schools, opportunity scholarships, merit pay, and Parent Trigger laws. The study focuses on national as well as local trends in urban school districts in Denver, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and New York City. The entire dataset includes over 250 interviews with policymakers and representatives of intermediary organizations; over 700 blog posts from 37 education policy blogs; and scores of policy documents that were recommended by participants and/or appeared in blogs posts, such as research and policy reports. Our analysis expands on earlier bibliometrics analyses of a segment of our dataset (Goldie et al., 2014) to understand the understudied phenomenon of evidence use in the context of the blogosphere.

Mixed Methods Approach

We adopted a concurrent mixed methods approach (Greene et al., 1989) to analyze evidence use and IO engagement in policymaking. Accordingly, we adopted Greene's (2007) initiation design through the seven-stage process of data reduction, display, transformation, correlation, consolidation, comparison, and integration to guide our analysis of interview and blog data. These seven stages allowed for the initiation of new themes, comparisons, and analytic lenses.

Data Sources

Education policy blogs. We generated a sample of education policy blogs in three steps. First, in 2011, we identified education policy blogs to follow over the course of the research. Then, we added blogs to the sample based on interviewees' responses of which blogs they use for evidence and advocacy purposes. Through these two strategies, we generated a list of 24 blogs. In the final step, we examined the types of incentivist policies mentioned, names of blogs or blog posts mentioned, and the locales of focus in

these 24 blogs. This examination led us to add 13 more blogs to the sample in order to capture a broader range of IOs and perspectives specific to incentivist policies in the cities of focus. Between 2012 and 2015, we followed a total of 37 different education policy blogs at different times throughout our data collection period (see Table 1). We collected a total of 741 blog posts from these 37 education policy blogs (see Table 2). Examples of blogs that belonged to university researcher bloggers included those of Professors Sara Goldrick-Rab and Bruce Baker; blogs that belonged to educators and advocates included those of Anthony Cody and Mark Weber; and multiple-authored intermediary organization blogs include those of National Education Policy Center, *Education Week*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and *Chalkbeat*.

Blog post data collection procedures. In this analysis, we focus on the 2014 data, which include over 398 blog posts from 15 (out of 37) education policy blogs. In 2014, we collected the largest amount of blog posts per year. Also, we suspect 2014 offered the greatest likelihood of catching references to three sources of evidence that were well cited in our interview data: The New Teacher Project's report, *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg et al., 2009); reports from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching project (2010); and the national charter school study conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO, 2013).

Using a blog post protocol guide, we collected salient details from the 398 posts in these 14 blogs. Drawing from coding strategies of our interview and document data, for each blog post, we checked for keywords: charter schools, opportunity scholarships, vouchers, merit pay, pay for performance, NCLB reauthorization, and Parent Trigger. When a blog post matched one or more of these keywords, we collected identifying information (e.g., author, title, and date), a 40-word summary, and issues and regions (i.e., cities, states) discussed in each post. For each qualifying blog post, we also documented all "citations," or mentions of persons, organizations, or groups; and we documented 22 different types of evidence cited in each blog (see Table 3). We stored these data in the citation management software RefWorks.

Interviews. Between 2011 and 2015, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) with 14 education policy bloggers. These bloggers held different positions on incentivist policies and different IO affiliations. Interview participants in our broader study (i.e., policymakers and representatives of IOs) mentioned these bloggers. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 min. During interviews, we asked bloggers to comment on the types of evidence sources they trust or find suspect, and why; and how

Table 1. How Do Intermediary Organizations Define and Disseminate Research for Educational Policymaking? Blogs Tracked 2011–2015.

Blog title	Primary blogger	U.S. regional focus
A Sociological Eye on Education	Aaron Pallas	National
Campaign for America's Future	Jeff Bryant	National
Chalkbeat	Multiple	Colorado
Crazy Crawfish's Blog	Jason France	New Orleans
Daily Kos	Teacherken	National
Education Evolving	Multiple	National & Minnesota
Education Policy Blog	Multiple	National
Education Week	Arianna Prothero	National
EduShyster	Jennifer Berkshire	Boston
Eduwonk	Andrew J. Rotherham	National
EdWeek: Bridging Differences*	Deborah Meier	National
EdWeek: District Dossier*	Lesli A. Maxwell	National
EdWeek: Living in Dialogue*	Anthony Cody	National
EdWeek: Politics K-12*	Alyson Klein	National
EdWeek: State Ed Watch*	Andrew Ujifusa	National
Flypaper (Thomas B. Fordham Institute)	Multiple	National
Forum for Education and Policy	Multiple	National
Huffington Post	Alfie Kohn	National
Huffington Post	Joel Shatzky	National
Huffington Post	John Thompson	National
Huffington Post	Rick Ayers	National
Jay P. Greene's Blog	Multiple	National
Jersey Jazzman	Mark Weber	New Jersey
Living & Learning in Poverty	Multiple	National
Louisiana Educator	Michael Deshotels	Louisiana
Mike Rose's Blog	Mike Rose	National
National Journal Ed Experts	Multiple	National
Parent Revolution	Multiple	California
School Finance 101	Bruce Baker	National
School Reform and Classroom Practice	Larry Cuban	National
Shanker Blog	Matthew Di Carlo	National
Sherman Dorn	Sherman Dorn	National
SmallTalk Blog	Mike Klonsky	National
Susan Ohanian	Susan Ohanian	National
The Answer Sheet	Valerie Strauss	National
The EduOptimists	Sara Goldrick-Rab	National
White House Blog	Multiple	National

Note. *Data from EdWeek blogs are reported as one group.

they disseminate their writing and to what intended audiences. If interview participants provided their consent, we audio recorded the interview; all interview recordings were transcribed.

Table 2. How Do Intermediary Organizations Define and Disseminate Research for Educational Policymaking? Total Blog Posts Collected 2011–2015.

Year	Total blog posts collected
2012	232
2013	88
2014	398
2015	23

Table 3. How Do Intermediary Organizations Define and Disseminate Research for Educational Policymaking? 2014 Blog Posts and Most Used Types of Evidence? Frequency of Evidence Use in 2014 Blog Posts.

Type of evidence	Frequency
Photograph	0
Podcast	1
Book	1
Tax return	1
PowerPoint presentation	2
Journal article	4
Tweet	7
Memo, letter email	7
Policy brief	8
Direct quotations in newspaper articles	10
School documents	10
Video	11
Magazine	12
Press release	13
No evidence cited	18
Legislation	21
Visual representations of quantitative data	50
Research report	94
Posts from other blogs	138
Website	166
Author's previous blog post	190
Newspaper article	194

Data Analysis

We analyzed interview and blog post data concurrently. We drafted analytic memos, conducted transcript reviews, and held feedback sessions among our research team. These were integral parts of data analysis. Drawing upon these techniques, we inductively and deductively developed a list of codes, building

upon themes from literature on research utilization, evidence use among IOs, and policy networks. Three researchers coded interview data separately and met frequently to discuss emerging themes, which led to further refinement of codes and subsequent coding. We coded the 398 blog posts for the issues examined and evidence cited. We reduced the types of evidence cited in blog posts into four groups: documents, research, news, and Web-based and social media. The themes that emerged from the interviews and blog posts regarding the characteristics of the education blogging network and bloggers' e-advocacy are presented below in our findings.

Limitations

The research design has some limitations that must be considered in broader discussions of how IOs and individual and independent bloggers broker knowledge via education policy blogs on charter schools and related education policy. First, the sample of education policy blogs and the sample of interview participants reflect a larger proportion of bloggers who are critical of market reforms. Second, in addition to having a relatively large representation of anti-market views in the sample of interviewees, the sample size includes a smaller data set of 14 bloggers. Moreover, these bloggers have a national scope and are not necessarily entrenched in any of the four urban regions of focus in the larger research project. Third, due to fluctuating capacity in our research team and different frequencies of blog post publishing, the amount of data collected across the blogs varies.

These limitations likely shape our findings on the characteristics of education policy bloggers network, bloggers' perceptions of the role of evidence in education policymaking, and how bloggers use evidence in their commentary on incentivist policy. For example, the large representation of interviewees critical of charter schools and other incentivist reforms may mean that they privilege or disregard particular types of evidence. Also, the profile of the blogs that we followed and the bloggers interviewed does not characterize the entirety of the education bloggers network. Given that this is a pioneer study on evidence use and brokering in virtual spaces, future research can examine similar questions with more varied samples and a larger representation of views on incentivist policies.

Findings

Bloggers in the Blogosphere

Education policy blogs vary considerably in terms of influence, perspective, authorship approach, and foci. Even within similar blogs, we found

Table 4. Participant Affiliations and Positions.

University researcher bloggers	Market reform position
A	Against
B	Against

Educator bloggers	Market reform position
C	Against
D	Against
E	Against

Individual blogger or affiliated with intermediary organization	Market reform position
F	Against
G	Against
H	Against
I	Against
J	Against
K	Proponent
L	Against
M	Against
N	Proponent

variability amongst the bloggers themselves in relation to their connection to education. In our interview sample, we found three main groups of education policy bloggers (see Table 4): (a) university researchers, (b) educators, and (c) individual bloggers or bloggers affiliated with an intermediary organization. Individual bloggers include those publishing independently on their personal websites, while bloggers affiliated with an intermediary organization write for the blog of an advocacy organization, research institution, or online media outlet. We interviewed nine bloggers in the third category; prior to blogging, they held various positions in and around public schools, including with a state teachers' union, state Department of Education, and charter school board. Describing the ever-expanding education policy blogosphere, Blogger F remarked, "Some of the bloggers are academics. . . but the vast majority. . . are people who are teachers, activists, former teachers, parents, who are writing about it in a way that it is much more relevant to sort of a broader audience." Blogger F's comment reflect the diverse perspectives among education bloggers commenting on incentivist reforms.

Audience

While bloggers' target audiences often appear to be their own affiliates (e.g., educators write for educators), university researchers and bloggers from advocacy organizations also expressed a specific interest in writing for policymakers. For example, Blogger A, a university researcher, noted that her target audience includes IOs with a wide policy influence: "So Education Trust, or American Enterprise Institute, or Institute for Higher Education Policy, Center for Law and Social Policy. . . I want their staffers to read my stuff so that they will talk about it when they visit the policymakers." Blogger G, writing for the blog of a national advocacy organization, commented that he was not sure if his blog reaches policymakers, though he maintains that policymakers "should" read his work: "I like to think it gets sent around to legislators and their staff."

Some bloggers, particularly those publishing for online news sites, such as *Education Week* and *Chalkbeat*, understood their audience to include primarily teachers, principals and superintendents, as well as other bloggers. In contrast, bloggers who publish independently were less certain of readership. A university researcher, Blogger B, recalled an incident where he was pleasantly surprised at a forum by his audience: "I had a bunch of principals come up to me and say, 'We're reading your blog. Thanks a lot.' You don't know the people, all you see is the numbers." Similarly, Blogger L, intending to write primarily for teachers and parents, was surprised to learn that a blog post she had written on charter school graduation rates reached a state legislature and informed their debates regarding state charter school policies.

Notably, virtually all of the bloggers we interviewed use other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, to disseminate their work, keep abreast with the discourse, and communicate with readers and other bloggers. The accessibility of these platforms helps bloggers to reach an even wider audience.

Aims

In terms of issue-specific aims, we found that charter schools consumed the education policy blogosphere in 2014. In the 398 blogs posts we tracked from 17 different education policy blogs in 2014, charter schools were discussed 73% of the time (see Figure 1). We suspect that the tremendous amount of dialogue on charter schools in the blogosphere was a response to the series of CREDO reports released in 2013. Also, bloggers and representatives of IOs reported that they felt merit pay was a "settled" issue and lacked viability, despite the fact that the $45 million Gates Foundation-funded Measures of
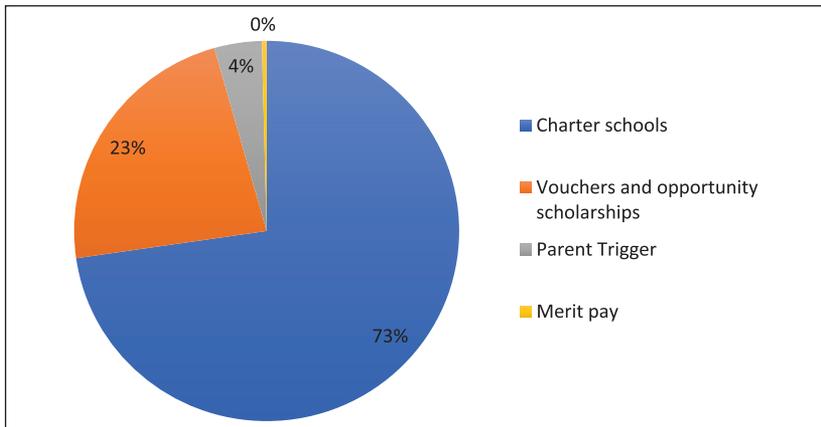
Figure 1. Issues in 2014 blog posts data.

Effective Teaching project released several reports of findings from 2011 to 2014 (Sawchuk, 2011).

In discussing these issues, we find that bloggers publish in pursuit of one of two goals: (a) *journalistic revisionism*, to surface accurate narratives regarding education reform counter to those (inaccurate) narratives covered in the mainstream media, and (b) as *activists*, to expose injustices experienced by teachers, students, and communities, and to rally readers around a cause.

Blogging for journalism. Several bloggers expressed that blogs offer a platform to surface a counter-narrative to corporate education reform and respond to what they perceived as the mainstream media's bias toward such reform. For example, Blogger L explained,

> The media will often pick up whatever the latest study is to come out of MIT or Harvard, but again you know there's a real bias. The studies that get the most play are the ones that confirm whatever the narrative is that everyone's already settled upon, so I view my role as a little disrupter. If I've got something that complicates the narrative that's what I'm interested in trying to help put out there.

Educator-blogger E attributed the "mass media's bias" to the fact that their funders are the very organizations that support corporate reform:

> For the most part, mainstream media is in the tanks of the reforms. So you have *Education Nation*, which takes a tremendous amount of money from the Gates

Foundation, NPR takes money from the Gates Foundation, *The New York Times*, for whatever reason, is very much in the tanks of the reform, as is *The Daily News* and *The Post*. So we [educators] could not use what would be the typical means to get our message out.

Embedded in blogging for journalism is an effort to correct misinterpretations or misuses of research among traditional journalists. For example, university researcher-blogger B wrote a blog post criticizing a journalist for "breathlessly championing" Harvard economist Roland Fryer's study on the Harlem Children's Zone. Recalling what compelled him to correct this journalist, Blogger B stated, "I wish it [the study's findings] were true, but come on." Another blogger echoed these sentiments, arguing that journalists' lack of methodological expertise render them ill-equipped to critique evidence: "The debate desperately needs people who have research skills and who aren't so firmly ensconced on one side or the other."

Bloggers also felt the urge to revise policymakers' ill interpretations of data. For example, educator-blogger E critiqued policy actors who go on record with "inaccurate information." She specifically critiqued Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's claim that 40% of Massachusetts high school graduates need to take remediation courses in college:

> The National Center of Education Statistics, which I trust. . . has said the number is 20%. That's a huge difference! Then Arne Duncan goes to Massachusetts, and Arne says that 40% of the kids that graduate from Massachusetts high schools need remediation in four year colleges. Outrageous. . . So it's through my blog, and it took me about two or three blogs, I pushed back, and I pushed back hard.

Similarly, university researcher-blogger B articulated his responsibility to "try to provide some balance" to the New York City Department of Education's claim that "the achievement gap has been eliminated":

> Especially with regard to New York City, the narrative was that things were going great and nothing bad has ever happened under the Joel Klein/Mike Bloomberg watch. It's constant progress, the achievement gap has been eliminated. . . it just didn't stand up to scrutiny. . . So I saw that as kind of a public service to try to provide some balance to the Department of Education, who has a public relations staff of 12 full-time people with an annual budget of like 1.8 million dollars. Their mission was to basically trumpet how good things were year after year about everything, everything is getting better constantly. And that just was ridiculous.

Stated simply, many bloggers published blog posts to disseminate counter-narratives to what they perceived as biased accounts in the mainstream

media, which are often funded by the same organizations that support corporate education reform. These particular bloggers found it imperative to correct what they perceived as misuses or misinterpretations of data and research among both the traditional media and policymakers.

Blogging for activism. Activist-bloggers suggested they were driven by a passionate desire, often at the expensive of time and money, to effect change and resist the strong messaging of corporate-supported advocates. Like journalist-bloggers, activist bloggers expressed frustration with the corporate reform movement's disproportionate amount of visibility and impact on the education policy discourse. Much of these bloggers' frustration stemmed from the belief that incentivist reforms negatively affect students, educators, and communities, as well as fail to deliver on its promise to close the achievement gap. Unlike journalist-bloggers, activist-bloggers saw their work as what educator-blogger D characterized as a "countervailing force" that "[resists] against the force of money" for market reforms. Often featuring the voices of activist educators, parents, and students, educator-blogger D elaborated,

> You have to make a countervailing force that pushes against the force of money. That's why I spend a lot of time trying to support activism because that I think that's the only thing we can do is to get people active. So that's why my blog has something of an agitational feel to it sometimes. It's not just presenting research in a bland way, it's trying to highlight and dramatize the evidence to hopefully motivate people to act and to get organized and to do something. . .I have a lot of teachers as readers and so they see my blog as a place that activism is honored and given a place to tell its story.

These bloggers noted their e-advocacy was markedly different from that of corporate reformers, who are paid for their advocacy work, both on- and offline. Several educator-bloggers' sentiments reflected what we know about educators' motivations to enter the field in the first place, which include intrinsic drivers such as efficacy (Firestone, 2014). For example, educator-blogger E, who claimed to spend most of her free time writing, shared, "I'm so passionate about this. . . So for me it's like, you know what? If you're a mom you're gonna do everything you can to protect your child, you just are. You're gonna stay up all night to do that, and that's what I feel, as though I'm a mom protecting, protecting my school and public education and the things that I believe in." Noting a distinction between bloggers who oppose and those who support market reforms, Blogger F shared,

Basically everyone is doing it just out of a sense of passion [whereas] many corporate reformers who maintain blogs get paid to do so. . .In Connecticut, ConnCan has two or three different platforms that they're blogging on. . . one of which says that they are related to ConnCan, one of which does not, one of which says, no, I'm just a person blogging, but we know that they're being paid for [by] ConnCan.

Tension between journalists and activists. A few participants saw themselves as both journalist and activist bloggers, dubbed by one blogger as "advocacy journalists." Blogger E, for example, noted an equal commitment to correcting the mainstream media's misuse of research and rallying educators and families to "[protect]. . . public education." However, not all bloggers believed that the dual aims of education blogging are complimentary. For instance, Blogger J shared that only once in his tenure as a blogger has he asked readers to call their legislators, because his primary purpose is "to get the truth out there." He elaborated upon the growing tension among bloggers regarding the overall purpose of blogging:

I think that there's some internal pressure between those bloggers who feel like we should be using our time to actually organize the resistance versus those that are saying, no, we need to be true to what we intended, which was getting the truth out there, and if some of us want to be activists that's fine, but that's not our role as the education bloggers. . . And I think that's a real tension within the blogging community of how we. . . in essence, are we journalists that are advocates, or are we advocates that are journalists?

Bloggers' Beliefs About Evidence

Reflecting upon the role of evidence in education policymaking generally and in the blogosphere specifically, bloggers reported that evidence garners credibility both for reform itself and for the individual(s) blogging about said reform. Bloggers perceived that evidence is drawn upon, and at times "manipulated," to justify positions and decisions about education reforms. Bloggers shared that evidence is "self-selected" using filtering features in new media, such as the ability to block people on Twitter, approve responses to blog posts, and control comment exposure in Facebook. Furthermore, individuals draw upon evidence to "have numbers in their pocket" as well as to gain influence upon and actively participate in decision-making on reform. In reporting these beliefs, many bloggers expressed that the "trustworthiness" and "validity" of evidence is complicated by increasing pressure to publish blogs in "real time" and poor access to raw data and empirical research. Several bloggers stated that because

Table 5. How Do Intermediary Organizations Define and Disseminate Research for Educational Policymaking? 2014 Blog Posts and Types of Evidence.

		Types of evidence				
Total blog posts	Blog title	No evidence cited	Documents*	Research**	Web-based News***	Web-based multimedia***
1	Sherman Dorn	1	0	0	0	0
1	Forum for Education and Policy	1	0	0	0	0
3	School Finance 101	0	1	3	2	4
4	Susan Ohanian	0	0	0	5	2
7	Education Policy Blog	0	0	4	8	8
10	Campaign for America's Future	0	4	6	11	16
11	Parent Revolution	0	1	2	4	5
12	Chalkbeat	0	2	3	1	14
15	Louisiana Educator	1	3	3	9	17
20	Crazy Crawfish's Blog	2	10	0	11	26
20	Eduwonk	0	2	9	10	15
30	EduShyster	0	6	12	28	62
46	Jersey Jazzman	0	1	56	36	118
47	Jay P. Greene's Blog	6	1	10	14	39
171	EducationWeek	7	18	42	90	187
Total types of evidence		18	49	150	229	513

Note. *Documents includes policy briefs, legislation, tax returns, PowerPoint presentations, and official school documents (e.g., school report card, handbook).
Note. **Research includes research reports, academic journal articles, visual representations of quantitative data, and books.
Note. ***Web-based news includes newspaper articles, direct quotations in news articles, magazines, and press releases.
Note. ****Web-based and social media includes posts from other blogs, author's previous blog posts, Tweets, websites, videos, photographs, and podcast.

policymakers do not use research, bloggers can serve as a "conduit" to research use among policymakers. For example, as described above, Blogger L recalled an incident when her blog was cited by a state legislature in a charter school debate.

Evidence Use in the Blogosphere

We collected 398 blog posts from 15 different education policy blogs in 2014. The five separate *Education Week* (reported in sum), *Jay P. Greene*, and *Jersey Jazzman* blogs had the most activity of these blogs. Bloggers used 22 different types of evidence in their blog posts (see Table 3). We

Table 6. How Do Intermediary Organizations Define and Disseminate Research for Educational Policymaking? 2014 Blog Posts and Most Used Types of Evidence.

Total blog posts	Blog title	Types of evidence				
		Post from other blog	Research report	Website	Web-based news article	Author's previous blog post
1	Sherman Dorn	0	0	0	0	0
1	Forum for Education and Policy	0	0	0	0	0
3	School Finance 101	1	3	1	2	2
4	Susan Ohanian	2	0	0	4	0
7	Education Policy Blog	2	4	5	6	1
10	Campaign for America's Future	7	5	8	10	0
11	Parent Revolution	3	1	1	4	0
12	Chalkbeat	2	3	2	1	10
15	Louisiana Educator	7	2	4	9	6
20	Crazy Crawfish's Blog	11	0	8	9	6
20	Eduwonk	4	8	8	9	3
30	EduShyster	16	9	26	25	15
46	Jersey Jazzman	37	13	41	33	32
47	Jay P. Greene's Blog	16	7	12	13	9
171	Education Week	30	40	50	69	106
Total types of evidence		138	95	166	194	190

conceived of these types of evidence more broadly in four groups: Web-based multimedia, web-based news, research, and documents. Bloggers drew upon these four groups of evidence distinctly (see Table 5).

Blogs and web-based news echoed more often than empirical, peer-reviewed evidence. Most often, bloggers used Web and multimedia sources of evidence such as the author's previous blog posts, posts from other blogs, Tweets, websites, videos, photographs, and podcasts. Second most often, bloggers drew upon web-based news (e.g., newspaper articles, magazines, and press releases) or research from intermediary organization-authored reports, academic journal articles, visual representations of quantitative data, and books. In some instances, bloggers referenced documents, including policy briefs, legislation, tax returns, PowerPoint presentations, and official school documents. Finally, in a few cases, bloggers did not cite evidence at all. Sometimes they drew upon more than one of these approaches. We found that *Jersey Jazzman* referred to forms of research more often than any other blog, while *Education Week* bloggers relied heavily upon Web-based evidence, specifically their own blog posts. We observed a similar affinity for web-based forms of evidence

when we examined the frequency of each type of evidence used in blog posts. Bloggers cited web-based news articles 194 times, their own previous blog posts 190 times, websites 166 times, posts from other blogs 138 times, and research reports 95 times. In contrast, bloggers cited peer-reviewed research just four times (see Table 6).

Research reports trump peer-reviewed research. In three blog posts (Weber, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c), *Jersey Jazzman's* Mark Weber cited peer-reviewed research by Welner (2013), Green and colleagues (2014), and Grissmer (2000). Weber drew upon this research to buttress his point that other individuals misunderstood and mischaracterized data and subsequently used their erroneous claims to advance charter schools in New Jersey. In one post, Weber used peer-reviewed research to argue that certain groups sought to "systematically dismantle" New Jersey's school districts (Weber, 2014c), and in another post Weber used peer-reviewed research to critique *New Jersey Monthly* editorial writer Jonathan Alter's claims about the superiority of charter schools. Similarly, *Edushyster's* Jennifer Berkshire (2014) used peer-reviewed research (Goodman, 2013; Goodman & Uzun, 2013) to critique what she characterized as an "education laboratory" in New Orleans driven by charter management organizations that work to attract new, young teachers to New Orleans charter schools.

While bloggers invoked peer-reviewed research just four times, they invoked research reports in their blog posts 95 times (see Table 6). Forty of these mentions belong to *Education Week* bloggers. Reports cited in the *Education Week* blogs were authored by National Alliance of Public Charter Schools ($n=6$), Friedman Foundation ($n=6$), CREDO ($n=5$), Center on Reinventing Public Education ($n=4$), Center for Education Reform ($n=3$), Fordham Institute ($n=2$), University of Arkansas's Department of Education Reform ($n=2$), United States Institute of Education Sciences ($n=2$), National Association of Charter School Authorizers ($n=2$), Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy, Gates Foundation, Education Resource Strategies, Center for Collaborative Education, Pennsylvania Department of the Auditor General, Phi Delta Kappan, Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, Mathematica Policy Research, National Bureau of Economic Research, Century Foundation, United States government Accountability Office, and Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR). With the exception of AISR and the U.S. agencies, these IOs unequivocally support market reforms. Given that several *Education Week* bloggers drew upon the strategy of citing previous blog posts, these pro-charter reports featured readily in the blogosphere echo chamber.

Impact: The "Ravitch Effect" and a Bloggers' Network

Eleven of the 14 bloggers we interviewed cited Diane Ravitch as central to the growth in the education policy blogosphere, a phenomenon that we refer to as the "Ravitch Effect." On her own blog, Ravitch writes original posts and also re-posts or links to the work of other bloggers. In addition, she disseminates other bloggers' work through Twitter. Several interview participants claimed that their readership skyrocketed after Ravitch first covered their work. For example, Blogger H generated around 400,000 hits after Ravitch promoted his critiques of corporate reforms. Similarly, Blogger L, once focused solely on state-level issues, earned national readership once Ravitch promoted this work. Educator-blogger E recalled Ravitch's influence upon her decision to write:

> Diane encouraged me to write. She said, 'You gotta write.' I kept giving Diane information wanting Diane to write, and Diane, and I'm so glad she did, really pushed back on me and said, 'No, no, no, you need to write, you need to speak out.'

University-blogger B asserted, "If Diane Ravitch re-tweets something or re-tweets a link, that gets a lot of hits or that draws a lot of attention. Because Diane has about 25,000 followers." Blogger G dubbed Ravitch a "super bomb thrower" who has earned much attention from her intentionally provocative approach to criticizing corporate reform.

Ravitch not only promotes and critiques bloggers' work, but she also shapes the content and direction of e-advocacy, building a coordinated network of bloggers, particularly those writing in opposition to incentivist policies, corporate reform efforts, and privatization, including charter school expansion, teacher merit pay, and, the Common Core. Along with Jonathan Pelto, Ravitch has assembled the steadily growing Education Bloggers Network.[1] The network assembled in 2013, as Ravitch promoted her book, *Reign of Error*. Seeking to publicize the book as much as possible, Ravitch and Pelto contacted over 50 bloggers with whose work they were familiar and asked them to review the book on their blogs. While Ravitch and Pelto knew "there was no system [where education bloggers] all spoke to each other," they did not anticipate the large number of bloggers writing in opposition to corporate reforms. The Network thus grew from around 50 to over 200 members (Jonathan Pelto, personal communication, February 11, 2015). As of 2015, the Education Bloggers Network consists of over 200 blogger-members (Pelto, 2015).

Network members exchange ideas and share data via an online project management program called Base Camp. In addition, Ravitch is president of

the advocacy group Network for Public Education, and at their annual meetings, the Education Bloggers Network hosts workshops for bloggers on such topics as investigative research and social media use (Jonathan Pelto, personal communication, February 11, 2015). Pelto defines network members as those who "write at least on weekly basis, whose platform is exclusively about the positive elements of public education and they're using that blog to both promote public education and, perhaps more importantly, push back against the corporate education reform industry." For exclusively engaging in conversations resisting corporate reform, Ravitch has been subject to criticism among many, including some bloggers who are hungry for a more balanced approach to blogging. Educator-blogger C describes Ravitch and her network as living "in the world of snarky blogging, they only attack." Yet, the Education Bloggers Network website includes a "Code of Ethics," a set of principles to which network members commit "as citizen journalists dedicated to truth-telling and democracy." Thus, although Pelto credits Ravitch as being "the patron saint of the [blogging] movement"—a movement that describes itself as dedicated to truthful reporting—some bloggers take issue with what they view as her overly critical approach to discussing incentivist policies and market-based reform.

These trends regarding the characteristics of the blogosphere, bloggers' beliefs about evidence, bloggers' evidence use practices, and the impact of the blogosphere offer an initial understanding of e-advocacy among IO networks. By documenting those involved in e-advocacy, their diverse aims and audiences, and how evidence features in e-advocacy, we have a baseline account of how evidence features in e-advocacy among IO networks in U.S. educational policymaking on incentivist reforms.

Discussion and Implications

Blogs are a medium where consumers are offered a "real-time" analysis of varying policies and trends within education. Yet although blogging can potentially enhance knowledge production and dissemination, our findings demonstrate that bloggers often promote research evidence of uneven quality and scientific rigor. For example, bloggers' frequent citation of news sources is cause for concern in light of research indicating that the news media often present ideologically-driven think tanks as credible sources of evidence (Malin & Lubienski, 2015; Haas, 2007). In turn, bloggers may cite such work with little understanding of its ideological orientations. Relatedly, bloggers often cited as evidence their own previous blog posts or the posts of bloggers with whom they were ideologically-aligned, suggesting an echo-chamber quality to the online discourse on incentivist reforms. This pattern extends

research demonstrating the prevalence of an echo chamber across other modes of online discourse, such as Twitter (Goldie et al., 2014).

Perhaps most concerning is the dearth of peer-reviewed academic research cited among bloggers, illustrating a missed opportunity for such scholarship to inform public and policy conversations regarding incentivist reforms. It is possible that bloggers were less easily able to access peer-reviewed academic research, especially as most academic journals have costly subscription fees and hence are not widely accessible beyond the university setting. In contrast, online news sources, previous blog posts, and IO-produced research are more broadly accessible online, often at no cost. Yet as our findings illustrate, a growing number of university-based academic researchers write their own blogs, in turn extending their work to wider audiences. As academic researchers increasingly engage in such modes of public scholarship and consider non-academics as part of their audience, it is possible that bloggers unaffiliated with universities will more frequently cite peer-reviewed research in their future e-advocacy.

Our findings offer an initial picture of the landscape of education policy bloggers and how bloggers use evidence politically and tactically (Weiss, 1979). Yet blogs' relatively recent inclusion as a way to transmit ideas requires an updated perspective in the literature on evidence-use. First, our findings suggest a reimagining of Weiss's (1979) models for research utilization within the social sciences. Specifically, the network of bloggers included in this study tended to use evidence both *politically* and *tactically*. In Weiss's (1979) political model of research use, policy actors pick and choose research as ammunition in a fight where opinions are largely already set. In the tactical model, research is helpful as a deterrent to criticism by the nature of "research is being conducted," regardless of findings. We studied a landscape where bloggers appeared to bypass peer-reviewed research in favor of newspapers and research reports. Bloggers' individual purposes for their decisions are a matter of speculation, but the interviews lent more support to the importance of robust evidence, while our indexing shows favoritism is given to quantity of opinions over quality of content. For this reason, the use of evidence among the network of education bloggers reflects a blend of Weiss' (1979) political and tactical models.

Our finding that there is a deficit of peer-reviewed research utilization in blogs suggests further inquiries are required. As mentioned before, the study of the blogosphere's use of evidence is imperative due to our knowledge that dialogs within education policy in the United States are being framed based on many of these online writings (DeBray et al., 2014; Goldie et al., 2014; Lubienski et al., 2014; Malin & Lubienski, 2015). It is worth studying what has caused the current setting of research exploitation that we present here.

The application of Lavis' et al. (2003) economic models of research use will be helpful to determine what actors might be pulling or pushing various types of information. Further research is needed to determine whether the bloggers' perception that policy actors are dismissive of evidence causes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy where the producer's view of the consumer determines what is produced. If the aforementioned lack of traditional research cannot be explained by this self-selection, perhaps additional studies will be able to locate a common cause (e.g., the power within an echo chamber, loyalty to an advocacy coalition, or common laziness).

Finally, the finding that bloggers identified two purposes underlying their work (bloggers-as-journalists/bloggers-as-activists) warrants further study. More data mining of the past few years of education blogs might reveal previously unseen correlations between the stated purpose of a person's writings and a host of other factors. The study of blogs at-large offers an opportunity to better understand an education landscape where new voices are being heard and engaging in dialogue. As a result, more work is needed to understand the groups that have been given an informal seat at the table. The findings of this paper can act as a springboard to better understand the increasingly nuanced nature of education policy dialogue in the United States today.

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Note

1. http://edubloggers.org

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