

## **The ethereal world of celebrity education research, A theory of information dissemination and belief formation**

by Richard P. Phelps

A few years ago, I read a research report issued by a high-profile education advocacy organization, the Education Trust. It was a well done report, but, it also was mostly repetitive of two other reports that had been conducted simultaneously a year earlier by five other scholars, one of which was me. Both of those earlier reports had been easily accessible and widely available, and anyone working to any depth on the topic should have at least heard about them, even if they did not bother to conduct a literature search to find them. Moreover, I had actually sent the organization the electronic copies of my work the previous year.

I was miffed. I did not accuse the organization of plagiarism; that thought did not even enter my mind. I was more upset that they were not exploiting the opportunity to provide exposure to as much of the research as they could. Would not an organization primarily interested in informing the public want to expose the public to all the information available? Would they not want to convince the public of the veracity of their research findings by mentioning the other studies that had reached similar conclusions? Are we not all in this together, this collective search for learning, information and enlightenment?

Boy, was I naïve. The writer of the report blasted me for my impertinence. He proclaimed that he had been the senior editor for a prominent news publication and had never heard of me. He asked around at that news organization, and no one there knew who I was. Then, he asked around at his current organization, and no one there knew who I was, either. In conclusion, he declared, I was wasting my time, and neglecting my family, by spending my evenings and weekends doing education research.

I detest snobbery, and I lost my composure, calling him pompous. Certainly, he was being pompous, but I was missing the bigger picture. He lives in a much different world than I do. Any research conducted in my world, our world, is truly irrelevant in his world. He works in the world of celebrity education research. And, indeed, his report was not completely void of citations--he did refer to some other scholars' work—to celebrity scholars' work.

Celebrity research is mass-marketed research conducted with the intention, at least in part, of attracting media attention. Celebrity research is restricted to a tiny proportion of all researchers--only those in high-profile organizations with public relations shops, and access to press microphones and in-house, or otherwise dedicated, publication outlets. (Think federal labs, think tanks, advocacy organizations, and the like.)

Celebrity research is not necessarily good research. Often it is; sometimes it is not. Regarding celebrity education research, in particular, the media tend to cover those researchers they consider to be well connected to powerful persons or institutions and that research they consider to be similarly influential. Again, that doesn't mean the research is of high or low quality, what matters is the high profile. As Daniel Boorstin wrote in *The Image*, celebrities are people well known

firstly for their well-knownness.

The theory outlined below is intended to provide part of the explanation for certain observed research dissemination phenomena, including:

how some blatantly erroneous beliefs about the extant body of education research can be fairly widely accepted at the same time a large, and in some cases very large, body of research evidence exists to refute them; and

how so much high quality research receives very little exposure at the same time some greatly inferior work on the same topic can receive quite a lot of exposure.

Celebrity research is not limited to any particular ideology or political alignment. It can be found anywhere across the political and ideological spectrum; at least that is true in education.

Neither is celebrity research necessarily limited to any particular subject area fields, though I suspect it to be more common to the more politicized research fields, and none are more politicized than education. Further, I hypothesize that the more politicized a research field happens to be, the greater will be the influence of celebrity research. In Physics and Chemistry, for example, I speculate that celebrity research is of minor influence, and non-celebrity research probably dominates. In Education, however, celebrity research already overwhelmingly dominates non-celebrity research in influence and importance.

### **If research doesn't attain celebrity status, it might just as well have never been done**

If a doctoral student produces a dissertation of exceptional quality at East-North-Central State College, in theory the work should get just as much attention as any other research work of similar quality. Many, if not most, of those who choose the profession assume the research world to be meritocratic. They assume that, if their work is exceptionally good, it will be acknowledged and influential.

In reality, the East-North-Central grad should probably feel lucky if all the members of the dissertation committee read it.

Granted, there exists an enormous mass of education research, much of it of awful quality, and no one has the time to read it all. But, it is also true that the correlation between research quality and that research achieving celebrity status, on average, is not very strong. Relative quality may have some influence in determining that one education research study gets high-profile attention and another does not, but other factors are likely much more influential—factors such as who one knows and one's conformity with certain doctrines.

What distinguishes celebrity research from non-celebrity research?

Celebrity researchers may make little to no effort at literature searching, which makes their work quicker and easier, but often duplicative of that already done by others. They may

still, however, speak globally about the research literature on a topic despite knowing it only superficially.

Citations in many celebrity research publications include only references to other celebrity research, if they include any at all. Neglecting to cite the work of another celebrity researcher can be injurious to one's career, whereas neglecting to cite the work of non-celebrity researchers, no matter how good or relevant the work, may be of no consequence to one's career.

While celebrity research can be of higher quality than the average in education, usually it is of greatly inferior quality compared to the best non-celebrity research. This may be due to the tendency of celebrity researchers to rely on an extraordinarily small subset of information on a topic—essentially, only the celebrity research literature.

A celebrity researcher may have access to dozens of high-profile publication outlets whereas a non-celebrity researcher has access to none. Indeed, unless non-celebrity researchers are willing to capitulate to the status quo party line of “the Blob” in education research, they may have access to no standard publication outlets whatsoever, even journals.

Celebrity researchers benefit from guaranteed publication through the organizations they control, while non-celebrity researchers must run the gauntlet of often arbitrary (and often biased) editorial review. Celebrity researchers can get their work published almost immediately upon completion. Non-celebrity researchers must wait months or years.

### **The unrepresentativeness of celebrity research**

The media often characterize celebrity researchers as the most knowledgeable experts and celebrity research as representative of a topical field. Usually, neither is the case. Nonetheless, some celebrity researchers do all they can to encourage the misconception.

In fact, celebrity researchers do not necessarily, and do not usually, represent anyone other than themselves or their organizations. They are simply the ones with access to the press microphones. And, in most cases, they did not attain access to those microphones through anything approaching a meritocratic or democratic process.

As in politics, where the fringes and extremes are disproportionately represented in media coverage, so, too, do they seem to be in celebrity research. In part, this may be due to the media's natural attraction to the fringes and extremes, as they usually make a better story. In part, this may be due to greater energy and less circumspection on the part of the researchers at the fringes and extremes.

From the standpoint of society's welfare, the chief drawback of celebrity research is its propensity to displace other, better research on a topic, even among researchers themselves. As celebrity research can attain far more attention than non-celebrity research, its influence can be

parasitic. Researchers new to a topic may cite the celebrity research, which is easily found, and ignore better research, that is more difficult to find. If these other researchers accept what celebrity researchers have to say about the research literature, including the extraordinarily common suggestion that no other research worth reading has been conducted on the topic, they may not even bother to search for the other work. The end result is a society denied the benefits of the other work and access to the complete body of research literature, in favor of a very small and restricted set of it. Given this dynamic, in the long run, only celebrity research will have any influence, irrespective of quality.

## **ET = Education Tonight**

How celebrity research can drastically reduce the information available on a topic can be illustrated by the example of a celebrity organizations's press conference. Journalists are invited and the organization's version of the knowledge base is presented. In the last two events of this type that I attended, the meeting rooms were filled with dozens of people and, judging from the sign-in sheets, probably half of them were journalists.

If a few dozen journalists devote half a day of their busy schedules to absorb one organizations's take on a specific issue, how much attention will be devoted to the non-celebrity research on that issue? Maybe none. After all, the journalists already have that story; they got it at the celebrity organization's press conference.

Imagine, by contrast, what would happen to the coverage of an issue if there was no celebrity research. Those same two or three dozen journalists would, instead, cover the issue each in his or her own way. Given a variety of approaches, a wide variety of research and researchers likely would be uncovered and presented to the public. The public would then benefit from a much wider pool of information, and a greater range of perspectives. Society would be far better informed on the issue.

## **Dumbing us down**

There is little glory in doing a literature search. It can be tedious work, even in this age of huge indexed databases and huge computers to summarize them in a several-second swipe. Research glory is found only in the end game—the final analysis of information that other, lesser folk took the trouble to collect and organize. Thus, some celebrity researchers leave literature searching, if they do it at all, to research assistants or librarians, who may have little or no understanding of the topic at hand.

Without conducting a fairly thorough literature review, however, there can be no assurance that one is not duplicating work already done. Moreover, one will then understand a topic no better than a researcher who approached the same topic decades earlier. Either way, research absent an effort to understand the work already done by others is wasteful and may not advance humanity's understanding of the topic at all; indeed, it could even reverse it. It is also rude and disrespectful of the work--often courageous or path breaking work--accomplished by worthy and dedicated scholars, whose only fault is not being celebrities.

It has probably not escaped the reasoning of some more ambitious researchers, though, that it can be to their selfish advantage to ignore or dismiss previous work on a topic. And, if that previous work was conducted by non-celebrities and received little attention from the press, few observers of any celebrity importance will notice the duplication. If previous work is ignored (or dismissed as unimportant) then the ambitious researcher can claim to be the first, a research pioneer. Indeed, the ambitious researcher can wait until a topic starts to gain some media attention, and only then pounce on the research opportunity, thus not wasting any time on topics unlikely to add to one's celebrity status. If all previous research work on a topic was conducted during a period the media paid no attention to that topic, the previous research does not exist in the ethereal world of celebrity research—so, it does not really count.

A few years ago, I had a long conversation with a researcher at Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Margaret Raymond, who seemed new to a particular topic with which I was more familiar. I emphasized that the research literature on the topic was voluminous, but had become obscure, and largely suppressed, I surmised, by interests that benefitted from suppressing it. I encouraged this scholar to look in to it, publicize it, and get involved in the topic.

A year later, I read a report written by the same scholar, and news reports of the scholar's public comments. She declared that virtually no good work on the topic existed but the void would soon be filled by the efforts of her group and others she knew. It was, arguably, the most critical moment in U.S. history for public consideration of the topic in question, and top-level policy makers were listening. Crucial policy decisions needed to be made, and a wealth of empirical evidence existed to support those policy decisions. But, in one swipe, the work of dozens of earnest researchers conducted over the course of decades was dismissed, as if irrelevant and unimportant. Policy makers were expected to wait until the celebrity research could catch up to the need.

The traditional print research journal may be going the way of an extinct prehistoric tortoise. Web journals seem to operate with less restraint and far greater speed, and advocacy organizations and think tanks themselves can now post their reports on the web in an instant, ...and Email them to hundreds of journalists. An entire nationwide debate over a topic can be finished under the new order in the same amount of time that a traditional journal takes simply to get articles out to reviewers. Indeed, we often see nationwide debates over a small subset of studies on a topic—studies done by celebrities—that bear little resemblance to any debate that would take place over a full set of studies on a topic. The celebrity debates are no more likely to be representative than the celebrity research itself.

### **Star Struck, Academically Speaking**

I once had the occasion to meet with a high U.S. Government official (Russ Whitehurst) involved in education research and much of its funding as he mentioned, with some relief, that Professor Famous (Eric Hanushek) had just spoken of some research results that seemed supportive of a current, but controversial, policy. I pointed out that Professor Famous had said just the opposite several months earlier. The official acknowledged that point in passing but seemed to see no

significance to it.

There seemed little purpose in adding, then, that Professor Famous had no practical experience in the field, was a specialist in a different field and had only just started studying the topic in question, that dozens of other researchers knew the topic better, that his was a single study and that hundreds of other studies had been conducted over the course of several decades (of which Professor Famous seemed unaware). After all, he was Professor Famous.

The outcome of ordinary research's natural dynamic is to expand the pool of information. The outcome of celebrity research's natural dynamic is to constrict it, to make it smaller and more manageable.

On another occasion, I attended a large meeting of folk active in education advocacy held in a celebrity research organization's (the American Enterprise Institute) building immediately after a public forum there. The meeting was chaired by someone fairly influential (Williamson Evers). He wanted those in the room who had given freely of their evenings and weekends for years for causes they believed in to help out some more on certain current issues he thought important. Fair enough.

As introduction, he mentioned that Professor Hoxby at Harvard had told him such and such and that Professor Hanushek at Stanford had mentioned this and that to him. And, would we be so kind as to write letters, make phone calls, and stuff envelopes in support of these worthy efforts?

There were a half dozen people in the room who knew much more about topic A than Professor Hoxby, and as many who knew more about topic B than Professor Hanushek. Some of the attendees--accomplished researchers themselves--had risked their careers working for causes they considered noble, worthwhile, and bigger than themselves. No matter. They were needed to write letters and lick stamps in support of celebrity research. In the minds of some, the population of researchers (or, researchers that matter) is extraordinarily small in number.

Perhaps it was also assumed that because those attending the meeting gave of their time for good causes without remuneration or career advantage, they must be neither smart nor important.

### **Look at me!**

One celebrity research organization (the American Enterprise Institute) sends me regular announcements of their activities, despite repeated declarations of disinterest on my part. They also send me annually a large envelope containing publications, with a letter inside addressed to me personally. The letter suggests that I am a smart, responsible person who must be interested in education issues and desirous of knowing more. It also suggests that it is extremely important that the best information gleaned from the best research be disseminated so that all of us could be better informed citizens and do the right thing.

All good sentiment. For a brief moment the first time, I thought that this organization, with

ample resources and a very large public profile, had the intention of disseminating some proportion of the findings from the mass of high quality education research that is routinely censored and ignored.

Then, I flipped through the publications -- all reprints of articles written by just one celebrity researcher (Frederick M. Hess) at just that one organization -- and none of the content particularly original. He was using abundant resources and opportunity, to which only a minuscule number of researchers on the planet have access, to promote ...himself.

On another occasion, the same fellow received a request from a teacher for technical assistance in analyzing fraudulent accounting practices in his large urban school district. The researcher eagerly provided the names of five experts for the teacher to consult--all of them friends of his--other young celebrity researchers and pure academics with no experience in school district or data management.

The issue of accounting fraud in the district happened to be extremely serious and the need for expert help critical. Moreover, the teacher was putting his career and his reputation on the line by blowing the whistle on the fraud. But, this celebrity researcher apparently saw it not as an opportunity for strong leadership, not as an opportunity to make a difference, not as an opportunity to help a courageous citizen in need, nor as an occasion to do the right thing, but merely as an opportunity to spread work among his close (and obviously unqualified) friends. Luckily, the whistleblower teacher was careful enough to seek a second opinion.

I have made a concerted effort for five years to open up the research base and the public debate on one topic—standardized testing—through an open weekly web column providing exposure for non-celebrity writers, composing reviews of non-celebrity research, providing long lists of experts who know a great deal about the subject but who belong to no celebrity organization and, thus, are rarely contacted by the media, and more. Some have been interested in these efforts, but no one on either side of the celebrity research microphones—journalist or researcher—has been as far as I can tell. They seem content with the current arrangement that, apparently meets their mutual needs, and with the greatly reduced set of research information that they discuss.

To paraphrase Paddy Chayefsky's film *Network*--given all the possible dangers, drawbacks, and ethical affronts, why should we regard celebrity research as important and why should we listen to what celebrity researchers have to say? Answer: because they're on television, dummy!

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