

The news media and the Heritage Foundation: Promoting education advocacy at the expense of authority

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Almost every US household owns a television and a radio (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000), on a typical day over half the American adults read a newspaper (National Association of Newspapers, 2000), and the average American adult spends over two hours a day watching, reading or listening to the news (National Science Foundation, 2000). While Americans are often skeptical about news reports on education, they nevertheless want the news media to cover education more than it currently does (Farkas, 1997). Therefore, when the news media select a source on education, they position it to play a prominent role in shaping the education debate (Cuban, 1998; Farkas, 1997).

Since Americans rely on the mass media news as an important source for information on education issues, they indirectly vest news sources with the power to help define the terms of the debate. It is not that, through the selection of its sources, the news media tell Americans *what* to think, so much as frame what to think *about* (Cuban, 1998). In other words, those education issues defined by the public and policy makers as problems and the types of solutions needed to address them are, to a large extent, influenced by the sources selected by the news media (Davis & Owen, 1998; van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Lawrence, 2000; McChesney, 1999; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987).

The number of think tanks and their use by the news media as expert commentators has grown steadily, if not dramatically, in the last 20 years (Abelson, 2002; Dolny, 1996-1998, 2000-2002; Rich & Weaver, 2000; Smith, J., 1991). Analyses of the news media's use of think tank experts can be categorized into three main groups: descriptions of social change apparatuses, mostly conservative, of which think tanks and the media are integral and interconnected parts (see e.g. Abelson, 2002; Blumental, 1986; Callahan, 1999; Diamond, 1995; Ricci, 1993; Rich & Weaver, 1998; Smith, J., 1991), descriptions of specific public policy campaigns, mostly

conservative, (see e.g. Lieberman, 2000; Messer-Davidow, 1993), and statistics on the news media's use or description of all types of think tanks (see e.g. Dolny 1996-1998, 2000-2002; Rich & Weaver, 2000; Solomon, 1996; Steele, 1995). Though education has been a consistent subject of think tank publications from the Heritage Foundation's seminal booklet *A New Agenda for Education* (Gardiner, 1985) to the present day (see e.g. RAND Corporation's book *Rhetoric versus Reality* (Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer (2002); Heritage Foundation's booklet *School Choice 2003* (Kafer, 2003); and Economic Policy Institute's book *Class and Schools* (Rothstein, 2004)), no analysis of the think tank-media relationship has focused extensively on K-12 education.

This study aims to determine the scope and presentation of the education-related documents and spokespersons from the Heritage Foundation by the news media during 2001.¹ The Heritage Foundation is the subject of this study because it is one of the largest, most cited, and most influential think tanks of a conservative movement that dominates public policy debate and formation (Abelson, 2002; Diamond, 1995; Ricci, 1993; Scatamburlo, 1998). It is intended that this study will contribute to the larger understanding of how the news media use and present information about education.

This study found that news media outlets across the country regularly included the Heritage Foundation as an expert source of information on education in their presentation of education issues despite their general consensus that they are an advocacy think tank rather than an academic research think tank (Weaver & McGann, 2000). This use and presentation likely increased their influence in promoting conservative education policies like school choice, reductions in education spending, and high-stakes standardized testing (van Dijk, 2001; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). Before presenting the results of this examination, the literature on the news media use and presentation of think tanks will be reviewed, highlighting aspects of the literature that discuss the Heritage Foundation. Then, the methodology and the results of the content analysis will be presented, a brief overview of the Heritage Foundation and the results of the content analysis will be presented, followed by a discussion of the findings.

The Rise of Think Tanks

Think tanks are defined here as organizations that have significant autonomy from governmental interests and that synthesize, create and/or disseminate information, ideas and/or advice to the public, policy makers, other organizations (both private and governmental), and/or the press (Weaver & McGann, 2000; Weaver & Stares, 2001; Ricci, 1993; Smith, J., 1991). The first think tanks appeared in the first half of 1900s (for example, Hoover Institution, 1919; Council on Foreign Relations, 1921; and Brookings Institution, 1927). More appeared in the 1940s and 1950s (for example, American Enterprise Institute, 1943 and RAND, 1948). And, they proliferated during the 1970s and 1980s (for example, Heritage Foundation, 1973; Cato Institute, 1977; Manhattan Institute, 1978; Economic Policy Institute, 1986; and Progressive Policy Institute, 1989). Today, more than one thousand think tanks operate in the United States (Abelson & Lindquist, 2000; Smith, J., 1991).

The largest, best funded and best organized of the think tanks are conservative. As a group, they have wisely spent hundreds of millions of dollars to move U.S. public policy to the right (Abelson, 2002; Bellant, 1991; Diamond, 1995; Spring, 2002; Stefancic & Delgado, 1996). Soon, this group, sometimes referred to as “movement conservatism,” expects its expenditures to exceed \$1 billion (Kuttner, 2002).

Education is one area of public policy that conservative think tanks are attempting to change, and the Heritage Foundation is an industry leader. The Heritage Foundation began the efforts of conservative think tanks to move education policy to the right with the publication of its booklet *A New Agenda for Education* (Gardiner, 1985), a collection of policy analyses and recommended actions for the Reagan Administration. The Heritage Foundation has promoted its education agenda with a simultaneous, four-part public relations delivery system designed to both create and satisfy the demand for conservative ideas. The delivery system simultaneously disseminates ideological messages, policy recommendations and studies to (1) the media and the public; (2) Congress, the White House and government agencies; (3) universities and other research institutions; and (4) businesses and corporations (Messer-Davidow, 1993). “Every Heritage study goes out with a synopsis to those who might be interested; every study is turned into an op-ed piece, distributed by the

Heritage Features Syndicate to newspapers that publish them” (Blumenthal, 1986, p. 49).

The Heritage Foundation has been using and improving this system for over 20 years. Covington and Parachini (1995) describe part of this strategic alliance of conservative public policy institutes (or think tanks) and the key role played by the Heritage Foundation:

Today, over 100 conservative public policy institutes exist. They are closely linked through extensive support and communication networks. The Heritage Foundation, with an annual budget in 1994 of \$25 million, has actively worked to create or support a group of 60 state-level public policy institutes and think tanks while the [conservative] Madison Group networks with a similar number of activist public policy and other organizations across the country. These networks facilitate the exchange of conservative policy ideas, public relations campaigns, and political strategies ultimately aimed at shaping public opinion, gaining office, and winning desired legislation. (p. 28)

Some researchers credit the public relations system developed by the Heritage Foundation and now used by numerous conservative think tanks with being able to manufacture education crises and then resolve them with conservative policies (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Messer-Davidow, 1993; Spring, 2002).

Conservative think tanks take great pride in what “movement conservatism” has accomplished. Robert Kuttner, a self-described liberal and invitee to a 2002 national conference of conservative foundations entitled “Philanthropy, Think Tanks, and the Importance of Ideas,” reported the remarks from the speeches delivered by several conservative think tank presidents. Christopher DeMuth, president of the American Enterprise Institute, described how conservative think tanks as a group had “reframed the national debate by investing in and then promoting idea-mongers for the long term” (Kuttner, 2002, para. 7). Ed Crane, head of the conservative/libertarian Cato Institute, “complimented his [conservative] patrons in the audience for recognizing that these battles of ideas take two or three decades” (Kuttner, 2002, para. 5). And, Edwin Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation, described “his institution’s

strategic planning in building a conservative movement. He emphasized ‘the four M’s: mission, money, management, and marketing’ (Kuttner, 2002, para. 6).

Media relations, not research, is a cornerstone of this coordinated conservative think tank strategy to influence public opinion and public policy (Callahan, 1999; Covington, 1997; Covington & Parachini, 1995; Ricci, 1993; Smith, J., 1991). According to Stefancic and Delgado (1996), conservative think tanks “deployed a series of shrewd moves, orchestrating one campaign after another with the aid of money and brains” to make America’s social agenda more conservative (p. 139). Lieberman (2000) describes the media work of conservative think tanks as a continuous series of campaigns that focus on courting the press; attacking the press as too “liberal,” including specific reporters and outlets; marketing their messages often, in a variety of media friendly formats and from multiple, coordinated sources; and silencing their critics by responding quickly and fiercely to any opposing ideas or organizations that arise in the media.

Conservative think tanks use a variety of specific short and long-term strategies to change the way news is reported and to get their information and opinions included. Short-term strategies include producing and disseminating countless media-ready op-eds, news articles and information packets; promoting think tanks fellows available for news program appearances and personal interviews for print journalists; and funding symposia, press conferences and speaking tours for the press and the public to hear in-house scholars speak on policy issues. Specific long-term strategies include targeting specific journalists who they believe are receptive to conservative ideas and who might be swayed by a letter or telephone campaign and establishing programs to train conservative students to enter print and broadcast media (Brock, 2004; Lieberman, 2000; Messer-Davidow, 1993; Ricci, 1993; Smith, J., 1991; Stefancic & Delgado, 1996).

Despite the emphasis of marketing over research, Ricci (1993) contends that, in general, think tank researchers are devoted to “scientific tenets of proof and disproof” (p. 220) and that “we can expect most of those men and women to work honestly” (p. 227). Singling out the Heritage Foundation, Ricci continues:

Washingtonians know that the advocacy thrust of Heritage's research is paramount. Even so, they may say that because such research is technically proficient, it deserves some respect for its qualitative excellence. (p. 220)

Ricci (1993) appears to represent the minority view. While many laud the marketing abilities of conservative think tanks, the substance of what they market has received sharp criticism. Public Citizen (1996), Ralph Nader's social advocacy organization, described attacks by conservative think tank, including the Heritage Foundation, on the FDA in the early 1990's as follows:

For the past several years, a group of conservative think tanks with close ties to congressional Republicans has waged an aggressive public relations and lobbying campaign against the federal Food and Drug Administration. The campaign relies on misinformation and distortion of the F.D.A.'s record. Between 1992 and 1995, seven of the think tanks [including the Heritage Foundation] received at least \$3.5 million dollars in contributions from the industries with the most to gain from the anti-F.D.A. campaign -- pharmaceutical, medical device, biotechnology and tobacco manufacturers. (para. 1)

Lieberman (2000) described the conservative/libertarian Cato Institute's Policy Analysis No. 187 criticizing Head Start as "intellectually dishonest" (p. 102) . . . "but emblematic of the strategy used not only by Cato but by other right-wing think tanks that dress up ideology as objective evaluation" (p. 101). Soley (1992) set forth the weak scholarly credentials of Heritage Foundation personnel: "Of its 34 permanent 'fellows, scholars, and staff' members, only 7 have Ph.D.'s. None are renowned scholars in their fields" (p. 60).

Similar criticisms exist regarding conservative think tank research on education. Spring (2002) describes the conservative Manhattan Institute's research on education vouchers as "not a search for truth but a search for justifications for its political program . . . the goal of the institute's support of research is not to prove vouchers are effective but to create arguments supporting voucher plans" (pp. 31-32). Spring's conclusion appears consistent with two recent analyses of the Manhattan Institute's "An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program" (Greene, 2001). Camilli and Bulkley (2001) concluded that the Manhattan Institute's report was a "generous and simplistic reading of the evidence" and they "raised serious questions regarding the validity of Greene's empirical results and conclusions"

(2001, “Conclusion” para. 1) Examining the same Manhattan Institute report as well as public statements by its author, Kupermintz wrote in a generous tone that “Greene might have over-stated the case for the simple explanation he promoted in his report and in the press” which Kupermintz concluded had the effect that “the reader of the Manhattan Institute laudatory report is offered a false sense of a dramatic success” (2001, “Conclusion” para. 3).

Think Tanks and Media Influence

Studies show that the news media extensively use the writings and spokespersons of think tanks, especially conservative think tanks. FAIR, a liberal media watch group, regularly reports on how the media utilizes think tanks in their presentation of news. Michael Dolny, in annual reports for FAIR (1996-1998, 2000-2002), searched Nexis, an extensive database of newspaper, television and radio news pieces, to count think tank citations in the media by ideology: conservative/libertarian, centrist, or left/progressive. Dolny reported that in 1995, the news media cited think tanks over 15, 000 times. By 2001, the number of citations had increased to almost 26,000. Each year, conservative/libertarian think tanks were cited most often and were, depending on the year, cited two to five times as often as progressive/liberal think tanks.

Examining network television news programs, Soley (1992) and Steele (1995) found that these “expert” commentators were often spokespersons from conservative think tanks. Soley (1992) examined the analysts selected by network television news organizations during two six-week periods in 1979-80 and 1987-88. He found that the vast majority of these “experts” were East Coast, white males who were former public officials or associated with conservative think tanks. Steele (1995) conducted an extensive examination of “unofficial sources” presented during eight months of regularly scheduled network news about the Persian Gulf War. She found that think tanks, often conservative, were the largest group of experts, accounting for almost 30% of the total.

Only two researchers have described the extent to which think tanks have been utilized by the news media in its coverage of K-12 education. Spring (2002) writes briefly about conservative think tanks. He notes the “frequent appearance of their [Manhattan Institute] experts’ names in newspaper stories” (p. 32), and further states

that, with the support of conservative think tanks, Chester Finn (Hudson Institute) and Diane Ravitch (Manhattan Institute) have “flooded the market with neoconservative opinions about education,” publishing literally hundreds of articles in the professional and popular press as well as numerous books (p. 48). Spring, however, does not provide systemic documentation of this influence.

In an unpublished AERA presentation, Alex Molnar, who directs the “progressive/liberal” Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, examined both the extent and presentation of the news coverage of the conservative Manhattan Institute’s evaluation of the Florida A-Plus education program that was authored by Jay Greene. The Manhattan Institute report was not subject to peer review; however, two independent follow-up reports were done by Camilli and Bulkley (2001) and Kupermintz (2001), discussed briefly above, and both were highly critical.

Molnar (2001) found that the Manhattan Institute promoted their study in a nationally distributed press release and that the news media, including *USA Today* and *The New York Times*, picked it up, citing or discussing it in 30 news stories and commentaries. Of these pieces, Molnar found that 17 were printed without authoritative comment on the quality of the findings, 10 were printed with balanced comments on the study’s findings including criticisms, and three consisted of mostly comments or arguments questioning the study. In contrast, the follow-up critiques, published in the education journal, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, within one month of the Manhattan Institute report, were not cited or covered in the mainstream press, but only once in *Education Week*. Molnar found the lack of critical reporting disturbing and commented that “the distribution of [think tank] policy reports not subject to a peer review process carries with it a risk that sound [education] policy may be subverted” (2001, “Introduction” para. 8)

The findings of Molnar (2001) support the conclusions reached by Dolny, Soley and Steele—that the news media utilize conservative think tank writings and materials on education quite readily. Molnar’s findings also point to the conclusion that the news media most often present conservative think tanks in a manner that overstates their academic expertise and understates their political leanings and motives.

Media Presentation of Think Tank Reports and Spokespersons

The study by Molnar (2001) is the only study that has focused specifically on the news media presentation of think tank materials and spokespersons on education; however, several general media studies appear to agree with his findings and conclusions.

The FAIR report on the news media utilization of think tanks during 1997 also examined how the top four most cited think tanks—Brookings Institute (centrist), Heritage Foundation (conservative), American Enterprise Institute (conservative), and Cato Institute (conservative/libertarian)—were identified in the press. Since none of these top four most cited think tanks were liberal/progressive, Dolny also examined the labels of the top most cited liberal/progressive think tank, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). Dolny calculated that Brookings and the three conservative think tanks did not receive any descriptive ideological label about three-fourths of the time. EPI, on the other hand, did not receive a descriptive label just over one-half of the time. At the same time, when descriptive labels identifying ideological orientation or funding sources were given, the liberal/progressive EPI received a higher percentage of these descriptive labels, than Brookings and the three conservative think tanks. Dolny (1998) concluded that the news media not only use liberal think tanks less often than conservative think tanks, they also present them more critically:

The fact that [liberal] EPI was the group most often identified ideologically-and the only one scrutinized in terms of its funding sources-suggests that even when progressive think tanks are allowed to take part in the usually center-right debate, the playing field is still not level. (“Missing Labels” para. 8)

FAIR also published short articles on the news media and think tanks that provided examples of how the news media uncritically utilized and generously presented conservative think tanks. These included an examination of the widespread reporting of poverty and welfare advocacy pieces promulgated by Robert Reed of the Heritage Foundation as “research” (Ackerman, 1999), examples of when the news media failed to describe Heritage Foundation funding sources in news reports where it might affect the objectivity of their expert commentary (Solomon, 1996), and survey results from news journalists, noting that more than half “often” or “nearly always” contacted think tanks as sources on economic policy issues (Croteau, 1998).

In a study of four right-wing policy campaigns entitled *Slanting the Story* (2000), Trudy Lieberman also concluded that the news media uncritically utilized and generously presented the work of conservative think tanks. As noted previously, Lieberman concluded that the Cato Institute's Policy Analysis No. 187, which it presented as research noting the failures of Head Start, was not even remotely close to social science research. Rather, Policy Analysis No. 187, entitled "Caveat Emptor: The Head Start Scam," used a "rhetorical style of unbridled scorn" (2000, p. 102) backed mostly by news reports and numerous out-of-context quotes and mischaracterizations of research studies that turned the words of Head Start supporters into criticisms. According to Lieberman, the Cato Institute then used these "criticisms" to support No. 187's conclusions that Head Start should be eliminated or replaced with a pre-school voucher program.

In addition, Lieberman notes that No. 187's author, John Hood, was not qualified to evaluate Head Start. At the time of the report, he was research director for the John Locke Foundation, a conservative state-policy think tank in North Carolina that worked "mostly on state fiscal matters" (2000, p. 107). He did not have expertise or experience in investigative reporting, child development or the evaluation of education programs.

Nevertheless, both No. 187 and John Hood received extensive, supportive coverage in the news media. According to Lieberman, the news media, through numerous hard news and syndicated opinion columns in newspapers across the country, presented No. 187 as "research" and John Hood as a "researcher," "expert," and "academic" (2000, pp. 108-109). Further, the Cato Institute itself was also given quite favorable coverage for it was presented as either having "expertise" in child development (2000, p. 110) or with such lacklustre descriptors like "Cato Institute" or "Washington-based research organization" from which readers could not discern Cato's ideological orientation. (2000, p. 110) Taking all this together, Lieberman concludes:

Cato's attack also exemplified the media's gullibility, intellectual laziness, and eagerness to run with a story without searching what was behind it. The media gave a massive amount of attention to Cato's one-sided analysis, failed to do its own digging to verify its claims, and allowed Cato to portray Head Start in a way that was both incomplete and misleading. (2000, p. 102)

Explaining the Think Tank-New Media Relationship

Despite her strong language, Lieberman's final thoughts on why the media uncritically utilize—and even misrepresent—conservative think tank writings and spokespersons is much more subdued. Lieberman shies away from the possible conclusion that journalists consciously alter the news and characterizes journalists as having “*unwittingly* [emphasis added] helped advance the right wing's agenda” (2000, p. 157). This appears to fit into the most accepted description of news production. According to Allan (2000), “journalists are not propagandists” (p. 60) who intentionally misrepresent the news; rather “it is the culture of routine, day-to-day interactions within specific news institutions” (p. 61) which determine how and what news is produced. In this vein, Lieberman (2000), gives four related explanations for why conservative think tanks receive extensive and favorable news coverage despite the criticisms of their work and credentials.

First, today's journalists are now more predisposed to accept right-wing explanations as valid because, on economic matters, journalists are more conservative than the public at large.

Second, large corporate media owners subtly steer reporters away from stories that might affect their bottom line economic interests. Learning the “master narrative” of their media organization, journalists who get ahead in their careers know what stories are off limits.

Third, a journalistic culture that craves conflict and balanced reporting has shied away from “connecting the dots” and instead publishes “he said, she said” accounts of events while limiting their comments on the consequences of what is being advocated (pp. 158-59). According to Lieberman, journalists perceive that there is a lack of media-savvy, liberal experts, an overabundance of well-marketed conservative experts, and that no experts can meet their tests of “objectivity and neutrality” (p. 160).² In the end, they fall back on the “‘he said, she said’ model and hope that somehow the public will understand what is at stake” (p. 160). The end result, according to one unnamed reporter, is that journalists will choose conservatives most often because what drives expert selection are “angles” and “interesting ideas” and the right wing is currently “an interesting group to talk to.” (p. 161)

Finally, Lieberman faults an uninvolved public. Given the previous three explanations for the use of right wing think tanks as sources of information—conservative journalist predisposition, corporate media economic interests, and journalistic culture favoring conflict and balance—Lieberman concludes that the media will continue to utilize right wing think tanks until the public makes it economically unfeasible or ethically untenable to do so.

Soley (1992) provides a similar explanation. He suggests that well-known journalists (and most likely media owners) “ceaselessly” turn to the same sources, often conservative think tank, because they feel comfortable with them. Conservative think tanks personnel and journalists are part of “the power elite’s political, economic, and social networks,” while “labor union spokespersons, members of grassroots political organizations, or minorities” are not (1992, p. 43).

Another explanation is that conservative think tanks have “new” expertise desired by the current news culture. Interviewing a number of prominent television news producers, Steele (1995) finds that their expert selection results from some basic general criteria which are “unusual” (p. 805) and completely different from scholarly or “ordinary standards” (p. 806) of expertise. One criterion is “operational bias,” the extent to which an expert can make “predictions, [and comment on] players, and policies” (p. 809) and whether they are “good on television” (p. 802). Another criterion can best be described as credibility. These are characteristics that include whether the expert has “already been quoted in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*” (p. 801), whether the current expert being used can vouch for the possible next expert, and whether the expert has “real world experience” (p. 807) as opposed to book knowledge. Another criterion is convenience, including whether the producers have developed a “working relationship” with the expert’s organization (p. 802), and the “proximity of an expert to a network studio” (p. 803). Conservative think tanks, with their emphasis on marketing ideas through media campaigns, appear to have positioned themselves to take advantage of the need for this new expertise.

Such a conclusion is consistent with the findings of Davis and Owen (1998) in their research on *new media outlets*. According to Davis and Owen, new media outlets are talk radio and television, electronic town meetings, television news magazines, MTV, print and electronic tabloids, and computer networks, including the internet (1998, p.

vii; see also Croteau & Hoynes, 2000). They contend that “new media outlets” have small staffs and little research support and therefore intentionally rely on external interest groups to meet their information needs. These interest groups, they contend, “are well aware of this dependency and have proactively moved to meet it” (1998, p. 247).

As an interest group example, Davis and Owen note that the Heritage Foundation provides space for talk show broadcasts, sponsors conferences for the talk radio industry, and freely distributes position papers and press releases to talk radio shows. In turn, talk radio producers specifically contact the Heritage Foundation for information to help fill the long blocks of time that their hosts must fill. Davis and Owen do not provide any specific information on the extent or presentation of the Heritage Foundation materials by the “new media outlets” except to say that one radio host “routinely cites” Heritage Foundation reports on his program (1998, p. 247).

Davis and Owen conclude that new media outlets present the “research” or “facts” disseminated by conservative think tanks knowing that it is thinly veiled ideology because such materials provide inexpensive entertainment which means greater profits than producing their own materials. Since “new media outlets” are without an “agreed-upon code of ethics” or “code of public service imperatives” (1998, p. 254), audiences should not expect anything more than entertainment. Still, because the idea that entertainment trumps veracity is not made explicit, sometimes audience members “feel they’ve been conned because they thought it was purely public service” (Davis and Owen, 1998, p. 252, *quoting* Victoria Jones of WRC radio in Washington, D.C.). If the new media have any truly populist bent or democratic influence, Davis and Owen argue, it is “accidental” (1998, p. 253).

Ricci (1993) is a notable exception to this line of explanation. As discussed above, Ricci finds think tank research to be of high quality, and he seems to imply that it is “objectively” disseminated by an unbiased media interested only in public service.

Sometimes these institutes [think tanks] deliver knowledge to the city directly, in books, special reports, journals, conferences, and newsletters. At other times, information is conveyed by the mass media where, as we have seen, the constant demand for news about a host of policy issues ensures that reporters and newscasters

will cite think-tank fellows. With respect to amassing the facts, then, . . . the capital seems well equipped. (p. 210)

Ricci (1993) goes on to contend that think tank research is likely to be more helpful to public policy construction than academic research. Singling out the Heritage Foundation, Ricci writes,

think-tankers contribute to the great conversation because both professionally and politically, they tend to take principles seriously. . . [C]ommitment can make a positive contribution to the great conversation, for it can encourage fellows to restate the same conclusions in publication after publication, as the Heritage Foundation and the Institute for Policy Studies certainly do. Academic scholars, who may also study policy issues, are driven by a pursuit of scientific novelty, which does not permit them to repeat their findings again and again, as if they had nothing “new” to say. Yet in the larger scheme of things, where political decisions must be worked out in an open marketplace of ideas, such repetition can be crucial for inspiring and fortifying public opinion. (p. 225)

Despite Ricci (1993)’s conclusions that think tanks and the news media operate in a climate of openness and public service, his book finds that the vast majority of think tank production comes from conservative think tanks. Asking rhetorically why the stories of conservative think tanks appear to “stand alone” (p. 235) in Washington’s great conversation, Ricci appears to place the blame solely on the liberals—for he has no explanation. Instead he “leave[s] others to wonder” why liberal think tanks have not added their stories to this conversation in order to achieve a balanced ordering of public policy facts and theories (p. 235).

Little has been written about why the news media utilize think tanks, and specifically conservative think tanks, in their education reporting. Berliner and Biddle (1995) argue that the public perception that education is in crisis is manufactured by conservative think tanks and others who deliberately misuse and misrepresent research and who use the “compliant” press (p. 54) to disseminate that misinformation. Berliner and Biddle describe the education press as “ignorant [and] highly critical” (p. 11), possibly “brainwashed by the critics” of public schools (p. 62), “gullible” (p. 162), and “irresponsible” (p. 168). Berliner and Biddle do not examine why the press might cover education so inaccurately other than to say in passing that it might be due to “cupidity, bias, or desires to pander to readers” (p. 170).

In 1998, Berliner and Biddle continued their criticisms of press reporting on education by listing and then giving examples to support “deficiencies” they found in the press coverage of education. They concluded then that “the press seems either too scared, too controlled, or too uninformed to raise what we consider the most basic issue confronting education in the United States—achieving a fair distribution of opportunities to succeed” (p. 30). Instead, they contend, the press chooses to publish stories that criticize and ridicule public schools, following the “if it bleeds, it leads” rule of news journalism (p. 27). As a result, “the newspapers have become a *natural ally* [emphasis added] of those who believe that public schools have failed” (p. 27). Like Lieberman (2000), Berliner and Biddle (1998) strongly criticize the news media, but if they believe that the media are active, conscious partners with think tanks or others in manufacturing the perception of crisis in education, they stop just short of saying so.

Denis Doyle, associated at times with various think tanks including the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Hudson Institute, disagrees. He directly attacks the remarks of Berliner and Biddle (1995), interpreting them as charging that there is a media conspiracy against the education establishment and calling it “errant nonsense” (1998, p. 52). Doyle posits instead that media coverage of schools is “weak” because “the schools themselves are obdurate; they neither report on themselves nor provide opportunities for third parties—in this case the press and its readers—to dip beneath the surface . . . [leaving] not much of substance to report” (p. 55). Doyle limits his remarks to general media coverage of education and does not address the role of think tanks in this process.

Taken together, the research discussed point to the following conclusions. It appears that the news media utilize conservative think tanks works and spokespersons despite questions about their rigor and expertise, respectively, because it is convenient and profitable to do so. It also appears that the news media unintentionally present conservative think tank works and spokesperson in a generous manner by omission of their clear political leanings and their emphasis on advocacy as well as by accepting the scientific descriptions think tank present of their work and spokespersons without verifying whether this is accurate. The specific presentation of conservative think tank

works and spokespersons on education appear to follow this general pattern of utilization and presentation by the news media.

If these conclusions are correct, then one would expect this study to find repeated and generous citations of the works and spokespersons of the Heritage Foundation on education, including citations of criticized works and spokespersons without experience or expertise in education.

The Present Study

This study aims to determine (1) the scope and (2) the presentation of the Heritage Foundation by the news media by examining the news media's coverage of the foundation's education-related documents and spokespersons during 2001.

The Nexis database at www.nexis.com was searched for news entries that concerned education and included references to the Heritage Foundation. The search was conducted for the period January 1 – December 31, 2001.³ This period was chosen because it was the beginning of the presidential term of George W. Bush who has made education reform a key component of his agenda. The entries returned by Nexis were then reviewed for relevance to eliminate any “false positives.”⁴ One hundred fifty-nine relevant entries were found. These entries are every media citation to the Heritage Foundation as a source on education contained in the Nexis database.⁵

A content analysis was conducted by coding the relevant entries.⁶ The general coding categories included types of news media (e.g., general news newspapers, education publications, television news), specific news outlets (e.g., *New York Times*, *Business Week*, *Fox News Live*), topic (e.g., curriculum and school governance, school choice, Heritage Foundation activities), and Heritage Foundation source (e.g., names of specific personnel, publications, Heritage Foundation as an entity). In total, over 150 different codes were used. In addition, the Heritage Foundation web site (www.heritage.org) was searched for information on the foundation's media practices, publications, personnel and organizational structure.

The Heritage Foundation

Marketing Values

“Education” is listed as one of the Heritage Foundation’s 29 “key issue” subject areas (Heritage Foundation, 2002, *on-line*). During 2001, 26 different authors wrote 43 education-related publications. The Heritage Foundation listed seven of these authors—Krista Kafer, Megan Farnsworth, Stuart Butler, Robert Moffitt, Mike Franc, Kirk Johnson and Tom Hinton—as “Experts on Education.” Education-related publications represented about 5% of the total papers, studies and books produced by the Heritage Foundation during 2001. Nevertheless, education-related citations accounted for approximately 8% of its news citations.

The Heritage Foundation’s strategy for marketing conservative ideas on education appears to be paying dividends in the mass media news. The Heritage Foundation had its first news media citation related to education in 1979. In that year, it was cited once in the *Washington Post*.⁷ In 2001, 159 news items related to education drew on the Heritage Foundation as a source.⁸ In total during 2001, it received over 2,000 news media citations (Dolny, 2002).

Results

Media Presence of the Heritage Foundation

Often and Everywhere

During 2001, the Heritage Foundation blanketed the United States with its views on education. As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, the Heritage Foundation was cited by 81 media sources in 159 news items. It was cited in the print, television, and radio media on a variety of education topics in both general news and opinion formats. Excluding news wire services, which do not publish directly to the public, the Heritage Foundation was present in the media debate on education on average more than once every three days.

Table 1

Heritage Foundation Media Presence Related to Education, 2001

News Item		Media Sources	
General news	75	General news newspapers	39
Op-ed	71	Television programs	13
Personnel	11	Policy publications	9
Event calendar	2	News wire services	7
<i>Total</i>	<i>159</i>	Business publications	6
		Radio programs	4
		Education publications	3
		<i>Total</i>	<i>81</i>

Table 2

*Number of Heritage Foundation News Entries by Main Topic, 2001*⁹

Curriculum and school governance	54
School choice	22
Education spending	21
Heritage Foundation activities	21
Role of government in education	14
Education legislation (ESEA)	16
Testing	11
Other education issues	5

During 2001, the Heritage Foundation received the greatest attention from the East coast national newspapers. This supports Steele’s contention that geography—locating near a national news broadcast center like Washington, DC or New York—is a key criterion in determining whether a group is included as an expertise news source. Table 3 shows that *The Washington Times* cited the Heritage Foundation 17 times during 2001, more than the combined totals of the next two highest concentrations, the *New York Times* (8) and the *Washington Post* (7). On the other coast, the Los Angeles Times cited the Heritage Foundation only once. The next two concentrations of citations were in the *Chattanooga Times/Free Press* (7) and the *Dallas Morning News* (6), both regional newspapers.

Table 3

Top Citations of the Heritage Foundation by Media Source, 2001

Washington Times	17
New York Times	8
Washington Post	7
Chattanooga Times/Free Press	7
Dallas Morning News	6
United Press International	5
Gannett News Service	4
Fox News Live	4

Other national news outlets that included the Heritage Foundation on education included Business Week, CNN Today (Cable), and “All Things Considered” of National Public Radio (NPR). In addition, local newspapers from Florida (Florida Times Union, The Ledger) to California (Daily News of Los Angeles, Modesto Bee, San Diego Union-Tribune) also cited the Heritage Foundation, though mostly only once or twice.

Heritage Foundation personnel were granted 15 opinion bylines and were television or radio guests on 17 occasions. Of the 15 bylines, eight were in the *Washington Times*, while the remaining seven bylines occurred once each in seven different newspapers.

In its citations, the Heritage Foundation presented its views on eight general topics (see Table 2) encompassing 42 subtopics. The topics included such commonly debated issues as school choice (yes), testing (more), and education spending (too much already), as well as less-debated issues like the relationship between marriage and educational achievement of children (it helps) and private-public partnerships in school construction (they are needed). Almost half (44%) of the citations were in editorial and opinion formats (See Table 1).

Opinions and Syndicated Columns—News as Stenograph

On several occasions, different newspapers across the country repeated the same Heritage Foundation statement to tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands of readers. The three most extensive examples are shown in Tables 4 and 5 below.

The first example, set forth in Table 4, began as a Heritage Foundation opinion piece entitled “Look Who’s Supporting School Choice Now.” In this opinion piece, the Heritage Foundation’s Jennifer Garrett argued that many members of Congress were hypocrites on vouchers because they were sending their own children to private schools while opposing voucher legislation and thus denying many parents this same opportunity. It was released by the Heritage Foundation on April 25, 2001.

As listed in Table 4 below, this Garrett opinion piece was distributed nationally by Scripps-Howard News Wire on April 26, 2001, as “Hypocrisy on Vouchers.” Over the next two weeks, Garrett’s opinion piece appeared virtually unchanged as “Hypocrisy on School Choice” in the *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, UT) on April 27th, as “Hypocrisy Rife on School Choice” in *The Chattanooga Times/Free Press* on April 29th, and as “Hypocrisy on School Vouchers” in the *Washington Times* on May 8th. In addition, Garrett’s opinion piece in the *Washington Times* was later cited by name on May 27th in a *Washington Times* opinion column entitled “Children yes, Unions no.”

In three of the articles, Jennifer Garrett was described as “a domestic policy researcher for the Heritage Foundation” and one article did not tell who she was. The Heritage Foundation was only listed as the “Heritage Foundation,” without description.

Table 4

References to Jennifer Garrett’s Look Who’s Supporting School Choice Now, Heritage Foundation, April 25, 2001

Title	Date	News Organization
“Hypocrisy on Vouchers”	4/26/01	Scripps-Howard News Service
“Hypocrisy on School Choice”	4/27/01	Deseret News (Salt Lake City)
“Hypocrisy Rife on School Vouchers”	4/29/01	Chattanooga Times/Free Press
“Hypocrisy on School Vouchers”	5/08/01	The Washington Times

From Michael Kelly’s Syndicated Column:

“And, as Krista Kafer of the Heritage Foundation has noted, \$80 billion of this sum [on Title 1] was spent in the past decade, largely in the Clinton years.”

“The Heritage Foundation’s Dr. Stuart Butler says that serious studies of major federal education programs either don’t exist or suggest that the programs are unsuccessful.”

The second and third examples, set forth in Table 5 below, are quotes from Heritage Foundation spokespersons that were used to support the opinions expressed in two syndicated columns. In April 2001, syndicated columnists Michael Kelly and Cal Thomas wrote about the problems of U.S. public schools and claimed that the recently released National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores demonstrated that federal education programs were generally a failure, that Title 1 money specifically had not produced results, and that Title 1 expenditures were another example of Clinton and Democrat spending that hurt, not helped, the poor. They quoted the Heritage Foundation’s Krista Kafer and Stuart Butler to support, or arguably, to make, these contentions.

During a one-week period, these Heritage Foundation statements were repeated 10 times (Table 5). Readers of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and *South Bend Tribune* saw both statements. In these articles, both Krista Kafer and Stuart Bulter were named without description other than being from the Heritage Foundation. The Heritage Foundation also was only named, but not described.

Table 5

Publication of the Opinions of Heritage Foundation Spokespersons

The reach of the Heritage Foundation’s influence appears to be extensive. From an office in Washington, DC, the Heritage Foundation put the three opinions of Garrett, Kafer and Butler, discussed above, before millions of readers across the United States. Table 6 sets forth the average daily circulations for the newspapers that published the three Heritage Foundation opinions.

Table 6¹⁰

Average Daily Circulations of Newspapers that Published Opinions of the Heritage Foundation’s Garrett, Kafer and Butler

4/11/01	Times Union (Albany, NY)	4/11/01	Washington Times
4/11/01	The Washington Post	4/11/01	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
4/12/01	Dayton Daily News	4/11/01	Chattanooga Times/Free Press
4/15/01	South Bend Tribune	4/12/01	South Bend Tribune
4/16/01	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	4/13/01	Augusta Chronicle

Name of Media Source	Circulation
Augusta Chronicle	54,600
Chattanooga Times/Free Press	65,000
Dayton Daily News	135,000
Deseret News (Salt Lake City)	68,000
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	278,000
South Bend Tribune	73,000
Times Union (Albany, NY)	99,500
Washington Post	762,000
Washington Times	103,000

Combining the newspaper circulations, the Heritage Foundation’s Jennifer Garrett, Krista Kafer and Stuart Butler had their opinions presented to 236,000; 1,347,500; and 573,600 news readers, respectively. These three Heritage Foundation staff members, during the height of the Congressional and White House debates on education spending and the place of vouchers in U.S. public education, told 2,157,500 news readers, including members of Congress and the White House who read the *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*, that Title I is a failure and that Americans should have vouchers. At the same time, these articles provided virtually no information for the reader to discern the quality of these statements or the expertise of these spokespersons. The reader would never know from the descriptions of Jennifer Garrett¹¹, Krista Kafer, and Stuart Butler that none have ever studied or worked in education. This aspect of the news media presentation of Heritage Foundation sources—generous omissions—will be discussed further in the section on Media Presentation below.

Heritage Foundation as News

At times, the Heritage Foundation itself was education news. Table 2 shows that the Heritage Foundation was the topic of 21 education news items. Six of these news items headlined the Heritage Foundation. For example, the two news articles from the *Education Technology News* were discussions of the Heritage Foundation’s on-line school report cards (“Heritage Foundation Puts School Report Cards in One Place Online,” No. 17, Vol. 18, August 15, 2001; “Schools Can Improve, Parents Get

Informed When School Data Is Accessible Online,” No. 23, Vol. 18, November 7, 2001). Both articles described how the Heritage Foundation’s Report Card Report site would improve school performance by providing parents and policy makers with data for comparing the differences between high-performing and low-performing schools.¹²

Table 1 shows that 11 news reports featured personnel changes at the Heritage Foundation related to education. The *Washington Post* article, “Appointments”, E7, April 2, 2001, is typical. Located in the financial section, this article announced the hiring of Krista Kafer as a policy analyst for the Heritage Foundation.

Media Presentation of the Heritage Foundation

The news media, with rare exception, generously presented the Heritage Foundation’s work and spokespersons on education. As shown below, it did not matter whether the source was a spokesperson or a document—almost none of the news media presentations described the Heritage Foundation in a manner more critical than the Heritage Foundation’s own descriptions of its people and its work.

For example, only four news items, or 2.5%, of the total 159 news items on education that referenced the Heritage Foundation included any criticism of the Heritage Foundation. They appeared three times in the education press’ *Phi Delta Kappan* and once in the *New York Times*. Thus, three of the seven items in the education press, or 43%, included criticisms of the Heritage Foundation. This was a much higher percentage than in the popular or general interest press, in which only one of the 152 news items, or less than 1%, contained criticisms of the Heritage Foundation. Interestingly, the education press was much more critical of the Heritage Foundation’s work on education than was the general interest press. The seven news items in the education press were 4% of the total 159 news items, yet they contained 75% of the total news items with criticisms of the Heritage Foundation.

Spokespersons: Experts Without Expertise

Generous media characterizations of their expertise were certainly the norm for Heritage Foundation personnel. During 2001, Krista Kafer was the Heritage

Foundation's most cited source on education. She was cited in 47 news items, more than twice as often as the next most cited source. On the Heritage Foundation web page, Krista Kafer is presented as an "expert on education" and a "senior policy analyst, education" with "expertise [in] school choice, education standards and testing, charter schools, [and] federal education programs (HF Kafer Bio, 2002). In the news media during 2001, she was presented most often in the same terms, as an "education analyst" (14), a "policy analyst" (9) or "of the Heritage Foundation" (19). Whatever title the media gave her, not one of the news entries explained the derivation of this title or Krista Kafer's qualifications.¹³

According to her Heritage Foundation biography¹⁴ and an article in *Roll Call* (April 28, 1997), Krista Kafer graduated from the University of Colorado with a B.A. in history in 1994. She then worked for the Colorado chapter of the National Right to Life Committee, Rep. Dave McIntosh (R-IN) and Rep. Bob Schaffer (R-CO) as well as Sen. Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign. According to the *Washington Post* (April 2, 2001), she joined the Heritage Foundation in the Spring of 2001. It appears that Krista Kafer has never studied or worked in education.

A lack of relevant expertise is consistent across the Heritage Foundation's seven "experts in education." Reviewing the staff biographies on the Heritage Foundation website, it appears that, like Krista Kafer, Stuart Butler, Robert Moffitt, Michael Franc, and Kirk Johnson have never studied or worked in education.¹⁵ One "expert in education," Thomas Hinton, has a B.A. in political science and Christian education and no work experience in education.¹⁶

Megan Farnsworth appears to be the Heritage Foundation's most qualified "expert in education." According to her Heritage Foundation biography, she has worked as a teacher, curriculum specialist and school evaluator, and she holds a master's degree in education from UCLA and an unspecified degree from Harvard's Graduate School of Education.¹⁷

Documents: Media Conferred Social Science Legitimacy

During 2001, the news media presented Heritage Foundation publications as sound social science research conducted by qualified experts, characterizations more

generous than the Heritage Foundation's own characterizations of its work. For example, fifteen Heritage Foundation publications were cited by the news media. Ten of these were "Backgrounders." Neither the "Backgrounders" themselves nor the Heritage Foundation website describes what the Heritage Foundation intends a "Backgrounder" to be. Ricci (1993) describes them as "essays, thoroughly researched and fully footnoted, [that] were usually written in six to eight weeks but could be produced if necessary within days" (p. 161). A representative of the Heritage Foundation described a "Backgrounder" as a "general recommendation" publication (Hunter, 2002).

The news media, in contrast, described a "Backgrounder" most often as a "report" (8) or "study" (5), a description that would lead one to conclude that they are more scientific and "objective" than either "essay" or "general recommendation." Seven of the 20 news media descriptions, "backgrounder" (1), "analysis" (2), "survey" (2), "document" (1), and "paper" (1), were generally synonymous with those provided by Ricci (1993) and the Heritage Foundation.

Documents and Spokespersons: Unquestioned authority

As set forth above, less than three percent of the news items that cited the Heritage Foundation on education voiced any criticism of the Heritage Foundation or its work. Thus, during 2001, 155 of the 159, or 97%, of the news items presented the Heritage Foundation in a manner similar to or in a more generous manner than it presented itself.

No Excuses was the only Heritage Foundation source to receive a negative presentation in the news items. *No Excuses* was initially released on April 18, 2000. Since then, it has gone through several editions and is now the focal point of a national "No Excuses" campaign.¹⁸ *No Excuses* or its author, Samuel Casey Carter, were cited in 18 news items in 12 news media outlets from January through November 2001. Four of those citations, or 22%, included critical comments. A review of these critical articles is instructive.

On January 1st, *Phi Delta Kappan* published its first of three lengthy criticisms of *No Excuses* during 2001. In this edition, author Gerald Bracey, a research psychologist

with a Ph.D. from Stanford University, criticized the methodology, analysis and conclusions of *No Excuses* and the subsequent claims of Heritage Foundation “education expert” Megan Farnsworth.¹⁹ In a *New York Times* article dated January 3rd, Richard Rothstein presented several criticisms of the research and conclusions in *No Excuses*.²⁰ Rothstein also made positive comments, but the overall thrust of his article was that *No Excuses* was inspired by “ideology, not evidence.” In the March edition of *Phi Delta Kappan*, Bracey presented additional examples for why he believed that *No Excuses* was poor research that presented inaccurate and misleading conclusions.²¹ In this article, Bracey cited extensively from Rothstein’s January 3rd article in the *New York Times*. In November, *Phi Delta Kappan* published an article entitled, “Point of View—No Excuse for *No Excuses*.”²² In this article, George Schmidt, editor of *Substance*, an independent newspaper devoted to public education in Chicago,²³ presented numerous examples of what he believed were errors in the *No Excuses* research in the Chicago area. George Schmidt concluded his article with these words

For more than 20 years, the Heritage Foundation has been promoting myths . . . Now, in *No Excuses*, Heritage rehashes discredited nonsense. The sad thing is that these claims and the shoddy numbers that underpin them are still widely publicized.²⁴

None of these criticisms—either of *No Excuses* specifically or the Heritage Foundation generally—found its way into any of the other 155 education news items that referenced the Heritage Foundation. No hint of the *New York Times* critique of *No Excuses* and by implication of the Heritage Foundation on January 3rd ever emerged in the subsequent six *New York Times* citations to the Heritage Foundation during 2001.²⁵ Interestingly, Rothstein’s article appeared the day after another *New York Times* article citing *No Excuses*. In that article, published on January 2nd, the *New York Times* gave a supportive citation to *No Excuses* and a glowing report on a Harlem school featured therein. Criticism of the Heritage Foundation’s work on education, it appears, did not reach across a single newsroom.

Putting It All Together

During 2001, the Heritage Foundation was cited

1. regularly and often;
2. in print, television and radio news sources across the country
3. through Krista Kafer, who was presented as an education expert without disclosing her lack of expertise; and
4. almost without criticism.

This resulted in a news image that often enhanced the Heritage Foundation's presentation of itself as a think tank that produced "objective," scientific research.

One further example illustrates the character and extent of the Heritage Foundation's presence in the news media as an expert source on education during 2001. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), enacted in Congressional bills H.R.1 and S.1 and titled the "No Child Left Behind Act" dominated the political debate on education for much of 2001. In its coverage, the news media utilized the Heritage Foundation as a source for commentary and information on ESEA. The Heritage Foundation was cited in 28 news items, of which 20 were general news items and seven were opinions or editorials. The Heritage Foundation appeared most often in the *Dallas Morning News* (5), followed by the *New York Times* (4) and the *Washington Times* (2). Krista Kafer or her work was cited in 25 of the 28 news items. Each news item presented the Heritage Foundation as a knowledgeable source of "objective" research information and analysis.

Of further note is the comparison of Heritage Foundation citations to other unofficial or nongovernmental source citations (Steele, 1995) in the 20 general news items on ESEA. The Heritage Foundation was cited 24 times (sometimes different Heritage Foundation sources in the same news item) while the other nongovernmental sources received many fewer citations: other think tanks (14—Brooking Institute was the most cited think tank (4)), university professors (4), union and labor groups (4), business leaders and organizations (4), and other news publications (2). As this research focused on the Heritage Foundation, an examination of all the articles on ESEA might find that the other nongovernmental sources were cited in articles that did not cite the Heritage Foundation, so that there is balance in the overall coverage of this issue over a period of several months. But the finding that the Heritage Foundation can dominate a series of 20 general news articles contradicts the idea that journalists consistently

promote a balanced, “he said, she said” approach to news. More study is necessary, however, before firm conclusions can be made.

DISCUSSION

The Heritage Foundation was created to promote conservative values and ideas. Emphasizing marketing over research, it has aggressively promoted publications and “experts” with little apparent expertise to policy makers and the news media.

This research suggests that the news media, at least in the area of education, uncritically uses and presents the Heritage Foundation’s work. During 2001, the news media presented a Heritage Foundation statement on education more than once every three days. Moreover, almost every news item presented the Heritage Foundation in a favorable light. Scientific words such as “study” and “analyst” appeared in almost every citation. Words such as “marketer”—a Heritage Foundation self-description—never did (Smith, J., 1991).²⁶ It is hard to imagine a more generous presentation.

How, then, does it happen that the news media present the Heritage Foundation as education experts when their self-professed mission is the marketing of conservative ideas, their assertion of “expert” in education could be determined as exaggerated with only a cursory examination of its website and news articles, and its publication *No Excuses* has been criticized as poor social science research? This question is especially provocative given that the Heritage Foundation has been described as a driving force in a conservative movement that has been the focus of the exact same criticisms—its lack of public policy expertise and poor social science research methods.

Part of the explanation appears to be the process by which the news media select experts. Experts are an integral part of news coverage. They add credibility and authority to news stories in which journalists aim to present an objective and balanced picture of events (Steele, 1995). The key, then, is the selection criteria. Taken together, Soley, Steele, and Lieberman describe the selection criteria as influenced by the conservative economic outlook of journalists, bottom-line profit motive of the media organizations, and a focus on predictions, players and policies that emphasizes

media savvy and real world experience over in-depth, contextual knowledge. This is in accord with general media studies (Allan, 2000).

This research study supports these conclusions. One could argue that the news media utilized the Heritage Foundation during 2001 because the Heritage Foundation (1) promotes conservative social and economic policies for education, (2) is a free and eagerly convenient source of media-friendly resources, and (3) will format its materials to meet the requirements of the news media, emphasizing marketing over subject knowledge. It does not have ordinary or scholarly expertise, but it has media expertise.

An additional question then is, why does the news media consistently present the Heritage Foundation in a manner that overstates its expertise and understates its conservative advocacy? One explanation appears to be the need or desire of journalists to meet conflicting demands—the professional need to present objective, balanced news reports (Steele, 1995; Allan, 2002) and the economic need to present news at a profit (McChesney, 1999). Having utilized the Heritage Foundation to meet the economic need, a journalist or news organization must now justify its use to a consuming public that expects experts to have more scholarly qualifications—namely, in-depth, long-term knowledge of the subject area (Steele, 1995). Caught in this irreconcilable bind, journalists might emphasize descriptions of Heritage Foundation expertise that the public will find acceptable and downplay or omit those that are unfavorable.

This research supports such a conclusion. The non-education press—from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to *CNN* and *Fox News*—presented the Heritage Foundation quite generously as a source on education. The non-education press, with one exception amounting to less than one percent of the news articles citing the Heritage Foundation on education during 2001, never presented the Heritage Foundation, its writings, or its spokespersons' statements on education as conservative advocacy or possibly questionable expertise or research. Rather, they were depicted as objective and scientific. In so doing, the non-education news media were able to enhance the credibility of their news reports while minimizing their costs.

This is not to say that the news media were not or should not have been aware of the Heritage Foundation's objectives and lack of expertise concerning education. In fact, it would likely defy reason to assert that the news media is not aware that the Heritage Foundation's experts on education are ideological wolves dressed in the sheep's clothing of scientific expertise. For more than 15 years, it has been an open secret that the Heritage Foundation, first and foremost, is a marketer of conservative ideas and that, at least, some of its experts and research publications are suspect. This is born out by researchers, information and documents available on the Heritage Foundation website, and by public statements made by foundation personnel. Many are discussed in this study.

Thus, it appears well-known that Heritage Foundation spokespersons are not experts in their subject areas. The quote from Soley (1992) bears repeating and expansion: Among [Washington, DC] beltway think tanks, Heritage [Foundation] associates have the weakest scholarly credentials . . . Of its 34 permanent 'fellows, scholars, and staff' members, only 7 have Ph.D.'s. None are renowned scholars in their fields. (p. 60)

An examination of the Heritage Foundation biography of their most cited "education expert" Krista Kafer, demonstrates unequivocally that her credentials fall well short of expert. Soley's assessment continues to be dead on.

It appears equally well-known that the Heritage Foundation is first and foremost a conservative advocacy organization (Weaver & McGann, 2000). In 1986, President Reagan addressed a room full of conservative donors who had gathered to celebrate the conclusion of a Heritage Foundation fundraising campaign. In his remarks, "the president commended the foundation's promotion of ideas through seminars, conferences, publications, and 'its buttonholing of congressmen—for informational purposes only, of course' [which caused] a titter of knowing laughter [to] spread through the ballroom" (Smith, J., 1991, p. 19).

The Heritage Foundation, itself, is not so subtle. As Edwin Fuelner, president of the Heritage Foundation, wrote at the beginning of the second Bush administration,

conservative opportunity and liberal opposition are about to collide like warm and cold fronts on a summer's day, and the probability of thunderstorms is 100

percent. This will be a take-no-prisoners war, and there are going to be winners and losers. Make no mistake about that. (Berkowitz, 2002, para. 3)

In this “war” of public policy, Reagan knew what Feulner boasts—expertise in promotion and fundraising, not the social issues themselves, is the Heritage Foundation’s clear weapon of choice. Nevertheless, one would have to read countless newspapers extremely carefully to find even a hint of this information in the news media’s use and presentation of the Heritage Foundation on education issues during 2001. Taken together, it is hard to conceive that the inaccurately generous news media presentations of the Heritage Foundation on education were anything less than the result of a reckless or even knowing disregard for the truth.

Examining the coverage of education issues, the results of this study support the media criticisms presented by Davis and Owen, Berliner and Biddle, and the strongest statements by Lieberman. Davis and Owen (1998) provide the strongest condemnation of the media use of think tanks in news coverage. They contend that segments of the news media—the new media outlets—consciously manipulate the news by selecting bits of pre-packaged news disseminated by advocacy groups like conservative think tanks that they can use to create news-like populist entertainment. The new media outlets utilize conservative think tanks for their populist entertainment because they provide free, ready-to-use, and engaging material on social and political issues. Whether it is accurate, is less important than whether it is entertaining.

Davis and Owen’s analysis of new media outlets does not include network television news and newspapers. Lieberman and Berliner and Biddle, whose examination focused on network television news and newspapers, might agree that the media is reckless in its reporting on education, but they stop short of stating that the press consciously or knowingly manipulate the news. The results of this study suggest that the positions of Davis and Owens, Lieberman, and Berliner and Biddle are now the *best* that one can conclude about the news media’s use and presentation of conservative think tanks. This research further suggests that it is likely that the entire news media—both the new media outlets as well as network television news, radio news, and newspapers—now act in a manner that goes beyond the criticisms of Lieberman and Berliner and Biddle to knowingly, or with reckless disregard for

readily available information, misrepresenting the conservative think tanks that they include in their news reports.

What appears most evident is that the news media's use of balanced "he said, she said" reporting as a means to achieve the professional standard of objective journalism plays into the hands of advocacy think tanks like the Heritage Foundation. Judis (2000) contends that there is a direct link between the rise of conservative think tanks and the news media's defensive use of balanced reporting:

The new think tanks and policy groups created by conservatives and their business allies began to overshadow their rivals. The press, on the defensive itself, began treating the products of the AEI [American Enterprise Institute], Heritage [Foundation], and the American Center [for the Study of Business] with the same respect as those of Brookings [Institute], NBER [National Bureau of Economic Research], or a university economics department. They accepted the canard that different views simply reflected different ideologies and that to be fair, both left and right, liberal and conservative, had to be represented. Once this concession was made, the conservatives triumphed, because in the late 1970s and 1980s they had for more money than their rivals with which to broadcast, publish, and promote their opinions. (p. 172)

According to Parenti (1993, 1996) and Altschull (1984, 1990), among others, news objectivity is a dangerous myth that balanced reporting will perpetuate, but never reach; in countless daily news decisions, "selectivity and subjectivity are unavoidable" (Parenti, 1993, p. 54). Taking "he said, she said" reporting and journalistic objectivity together, Parenti (1993) finds that news media's use of balance is inconsistent in a manner that promotes social inequality by favoring members of the corporate business class, like the Heritage Foundation:

If reporters play "dumb and more innocent" than they are, it is in selective ways. They may obligingly report whatever politico-economic elites pronounce, be it truth, half-truths, or lies, but they instantly resuscitate their critical faculties when dealing with dissenters. (p. 54)

Parenti argues that the news media must neither accept biases and distortions as inevitable nor strive for unrealistic objectivity. Instead, they should pursue a type of investigative reporting that

strive[s] for standards of fairness and accuracy—which are best achieved by questioning the self-serving assumptions of policy, by unearthing revealing

background material, and by giving exposure to a wide range of dissident critics along with the usual establishment commentators. (1993, p. 54)

With respect to the Heritage Foundation, this type of reporting is not happening.

In the end, this research presents a poor, and possibly damning, picture of the news media's role in the public debate on education. If parents and policy makers who look to the media for news about schools and education need information for judging its quality, this research shows that they did not receive it in the news media use of Heritage Foundation sources. If sound public policy decisions depend, in part, on a citizenry informed by news that provides a rigorous examination of the issues and a wide range of informed opinions, these findings suggest that the news media have fallen well short of the mark.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University for their support in this research.
2. The entire notion of objectivity in news reporting is quite controversial. Many media scholars argue that true objectivity is impossible and that the media's attempt to achieve it through presenting both sides of an issue reproduces conservative ideologies (see e.g. Altschull, 1984, 1990; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Parenti, 1993, 1996). These arguments are addressed in the "Discussion" section.
3. The destruction of the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001, impacted the news media coverage of events during the last quarter of the year. It is not clear how this might have affected the news coverage of education issues, but it mostly likely diminished it to some degree.
4. False positives were news entry references to "Heritage Foundation" or to names of individuals that did not refer to both the Washington-based think tank and education.
5. To the best available knowledge, the entries examined in this study are the vast majority of the education-related items published in the United States during 2001 that referenced the Heritage Foundation. It is likely that some media pieces are not present because the Nexis database does not contain every media source. The Nexis

database does provide access to over 30,000 information sources and 2.8 billion documents; however, it does not contain, for example, *The Arizona Republic* or *The Detroit News*. In addition, since the Supreme Court decision in *The New York Times Company v. Jonathan Tasini*, 533 U.S. 483 (2001), Nexis has eliminated many freelance articles published in the sources that it does contain.

6. The 159 news entries retrieved from the Nexis database were coded using the following codes.

By Types of News Media

1. General News Newspapers
2. Education Publications
3. Business Publications
4. Policy Publications
5. Television Programs
6. Radio Programs
7. News Wire Services

By Types of News Media Sources

1. General News Newspapers
 1. Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
 2. Atlanta Journal and Constitution
 3. Augusta Chronicle (Augusta, GA)
 4. Baltimore Sun
 5. Boston Globe
 6. Capital (Annapolis, MD)
 7. Chattanooga Times/Chattanooga Free Press
 8. Chicago Independent Bulletin
 9. Commercial Appeal (Memphis, TN)
 10. Daily News of Los Angeles
 11. Dallas Morning News
 12. Dayton Daily News (Dayton, OH)
 13. Denver Rocky Mountain News

14. Deseret News (Salt Lake City, UT)
15. El Nuevo Herald (Spanish Language)
16. Florida Times Union (Jacksonville, FL)
17. Houston Chronicle
18. Insight on the News (published by The Washington Times)
19. Ledger (Lakeland, FL)
20. Los Angeles Times
21. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
22. Modesto Bee (Modesto, CA)
23. Morning Call (Allentown, PA)
24. New York Post
25. New York Times
26. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
27. Plain Dealer (Cleveland, OH)
28. Roanoke Times and World News (Roanoke, VA)
29. San Diego Union-Tribune
30. Saturday Oklahoman
31. South Bend Tribune
32. Sunday Gazette-Mail (Charleston, NC)
33. Times Picayune (New Orleans, LA)
34. Times Union (Albany, NY)
35. Topeka Capital Journal
36. Union Leader (Manchester, NH)
37. Washington Post
38. Washington Times
39. World and I (published by the Washington Times)

2. Education Publications

1. Leadership (official magazine of ACSA)
2. Phi Delta Kappan
3. Education Technology News

3. Business Publications

1. Bond Buyer, The
2. Business Week

3. Chronicle of Philanthropy, The
4. Forbes
5. Government Executive
6. National Tax Journal, The
4. Politics and Policy Publications
 1. Federal News Service (FNS) Daybook
 2. First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life
 3. Hill, The (Washington, DC)
 4. National Journal
 5. National Journal's Congress Daily
 6. National Journal's Technology Daily
 7. Public Interest, The
 8. Washington Internet Daily
 9. Women's Quarterly, The
5. Television Programs
 1. Television News
 - i. 9 Eyewitness News at 9:00, WUSA-TV
 - ii. Channel 9 News Weekend Report, WCPO-TV
 - iii. Fox News Live (Cable)
 - iv. KOVR 13 News Tonight
 - v. News 3 Nightside, KVBC-TV
 - vi. News at Sunrise, KVBC-TV
 - vii. The Patrick Report, KTBU-TV
 2. Television Talk Shows
 - i. Barnicle, MSNBC Cable Programming
 - ii. Book TV, CSPAN-2
 - iii. CNN Talkback Live (Cable)
 - iv. CNN Today (Cable)
 - v. Softball, MSNBC Cable Programming
 - vi. WB2Day
6. Radio Programs
 1. Radio News
 - i. All Things Considered, National Public Radio
 2. Radio Talk Shows

- i. Diane Rehm Show, WAMU-FM
- ii. Public Interest, WAMU-FM
- iii. The Connection, WBUR-FM

7. News Wire Services

1. Copley News Service
2. Cox News Service
3. Gannett News Service
4. Newhouse News Service
5. Scripps Howard News Service
6. United Press International
7. U.S. Newswire

By Topics of Media Entries

1. Curriculum and School Governance

1. Reading
2. Zero tolerance policies
3. Technology in schools
4. Teacher certification
5. General criticism of failing public schools
6. General statements on the need for education reform
7. Food served in schools
8. Gender equity activities
9. Grove City College
10. Sex education classes
11. High-performing schools
12. Internet report cards on school performance
13. Grade inflation
14. High school marriage classes
15. Merit pay for teachers
16. Prison classes
17. Racial preferences in university admissions
18. School to work programs
19. Lack of free speech on college campuses

20. General statements on need for educational reform

2. Education Legislation
3. Education Spending
 1. Federal education spending and grants to states
 2. Public-private school partnerships relating to construction bonds
 3. Spending on public schools
 4. Spending and educational achievement
4. Heritage Foundation Activities
 1. Publications itself as a topic
 2. Publicized or media events
 3. Personnel highlights
5. Role of Federal Government in education
 1. Job Corps critique
 2. US Department of Education use of student information
 3. Head Start critique
6. School Choice
 1. School Choice generally
 2. Vouchers
 3. Tax credits for ed-tech partnerships
 4. Charter schools
 5. School choice opponents
7. Testing
8. Other
 1. Washington's Birthday
 2. Marriage and educational achievement

By Heritage Foundation Sources

1. Specific Heritage Foundation Personnel
 1. Bill Bennett (not named as a Heritage Foundation source)
 2. Stuart Butler
 3. Samuel Casey Carter
 4. Thomas Dawson
 5. Patrick Fagan

6. Megan Farnsworth
7. Al Felzenberg
8. Edwin Feulner
9. Michael Franc
10. Jennifer Garrett
11. Todd Goziano
12. Eugene Hickock
13. Tom Hinton
14. Scott Jeffrey
15. Kirk Johnson
16. Krista Kafer
17. Daniel McGroarty
18. Adam Meyerson
19. Virginia Miller
20. Robert Moffitt
21. Nina Shokaii Rees
22. Robert Rector
23. Janice Smith
24. Virginia Thomas
25. Ron Utt
26. Mark Wilson

2. Publications

1. New Tax Law Boosts School Construction with Public-Private Partnerships
2. No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High Poverty Schools
3. School Choice 2001: What's Happening in the States
4. Still Leaving Children Behind: The House and Senate Education Bills
5. The Report Card Report: America's Best Web Sites for School Profiles
6. Trinnietta Gets a Chance: Six Families and Their School Choice Experience
7. Why More Money Will Not Solve America's Education Crisis

3. Heritage Foundation cited as an entity

1. Heritage Foundation study
2. Heritage Foundation speaking as an entity

3. Heritage Foundation study
4. Heritage Foundation report
5. Heritage Foundation researchers, non-specific

7. According to a search of the Lexis/Nexis Database with the terms “Heritage Foundation and (educat! or school!),” the first article relating to education that cited the Heritage Foundation was “‘New Right’ Figure Sees McCarthyism in NEA’s Conference on Conservatives,” *Washington Post*, A2, February 24, 1979. It was the only article relating to education that referenced the Heritage Foundation during 1979.

8. See the section “Media Presence of the Heritage Foundation.”

9. Some news entries concerned more than one topic.

10. The newspaper circulations for these newspapers were gathered from the following sources:

Augusta Chronicle

SRDS Circulation 2002: The Complete Source for Newspaper Circulation Information, Des Plaines, IL: Standard Rate and Data Service

Chattanooga Times/Free Press

2001 Working Press of the Nation, vol. 1, Newspaper Directory, p. 2-212

Dayton Daily News

<http://uspolitics.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.infoplease.com%2Fipea%2FA0004420.html>

Deseret News (Utah)

2001 Working Press of the Nation, vol. 1, Newspaper Directory, p. 2-231

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

<http://www.geocities.com/newspaperstats/>

South Bend Tribune

<http://www.geocities.com/newspaperstats/>

Times Union (Albany, NY)

2001 Working Press of the Nation, vol. 1, Newspaper Directory, p. 2-147

Washington Post

http://www.naa.org/info/facts01/18_top20circ/index.html

Washington Times

<http://www.geocities.com/newspaperstats/>

11. Jennifer Garrett’s Heritage Foundation biography can be found at

<http://www.heritage.org/About/Staff/JenniferGarrett.cfm> .

12. The Heritage Foundation’s “The Report Card Report: America’s Best Web Sites for School Profiles” is located on-line at

<http://www.heritage.org/reportcards/welcome.html>

13. The only descriptions of her qualifications came in three appointment

announcements, “People for March 24, 2001,” *National Journal*, vol. 905, no. 33, p.

12, March 24, 2001; “Movers & Shakers,” *Washington Times*, D14, March 26, 2001;

and “Appointments,” *Washington Post*, E7, April 2, 2001.

14. Krista Kafer’s Heritage Foundation biography is available at

<http://www.heritage.org/staff/kafer.html>

15. These Heritage Foundation biographies are located at the following locations:

Stuart Butler

<http://www.heritage.org/staff/butler.htm>

Robert Moffitt

<http://www.heritage.org/staff/moffit.htm>

Michael Franc

<http://www.heritage.org/staff/franc.html>

Kirk Johnson

http://www.heritage.org/staff/kirk_johnson.html

16 The Heritage Foundation biography for Thomas Hinton is located at

<http://www.heritage.org/staff/hinton.html>

17 The Heritage Foundation biography for Megan Farnsworth is located at

<http://www.heritage.org/staff/farnsworth.html>

18 The Heritage Foundation operates a website for the No Excuses campaign at <http://www.noexcuses.org/>

19 “Backtalk: Response to a Criticism,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, no. 5, vol. 82, p. 419, January 1, 2001

20 “Poverty and Achievement, and Great Misconceptions,” *New York Times*, B8, January 3, 2001

21 “Research-At the Beep, Pay Attention; influence of social factors on academic achievement and learning process,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, no. 7, vol. 82, p. 555, March 1, 2001

22 “Point of View – No Excuses for *No Excuses*,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, No. 3, Vol. 83, p. 194, November 1, 2001

23 Information on *Substance* can be found at their website at <http://www.substancenews.com/>

24 “Point of View – No Excuses for *No Excuses*,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, No. 3, Vol. 83, p. 194, November 1, 2001

25 The following *New York Times* articles cited the Heritage Foundation on education during 2001:

“A New Model For Learning in a Harlem School; Tough Standards and High Scores,” *New York Times*, B1, January 2, 2001

“Poverty and Achievement, and Great Misconceptions,” *New York Times*, B8, January 3, 2001

“Cheney Assembles Formidable Team,” *New York Times*, A1, February 3, 2001

“On Way to Passage, Bush’s Education Plan Gets a Makeover,” *New York Times*, A16, May 4, 2001

“House Votes for New Testing to Hold Schools Accountable,” *New York Times*, A1, May 24, 2001

“Bush Seems to Ease His Stance on the Accountability of Schools,” *New York Times*, A1, July 10, 2001

“Inmate Education Is Found to Lower Risk of New Arrest,” *New York Times*, A22, November 16, 2001

“Congress Reaches Compromise on Education Bill,” *New York Times*, A1, December 12, 2001

Six of the eight citations came after Richard Rothstein’s article on January 3, 2001. 26 “Marketer” comes from the Heritage Foundation’s descriptions of itself. For example, James Smith quotes Edwin Feulner, the president of the Heritage Foundation, saying, “We specialize in the area of quick-response public policy research and in marketing the academic works for public policy consumption” (1991, p. 201). Smith also quotes Feulner characterizing the Heritage Foundation as a “secondhand dealer of ideas” (1991, p. 201).

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