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Information Pollution in an Age of Populist Politics

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Abstract: The increasing influence of private interests in public policy has been facilitated by a growth in sources of “alternative” information and expertise. In education, teachers and schools are often the targets of these sources. This has been associated with a new political economy where private interests advance reform agendas largely through funding new information sources that ignore long-standing empirical evidence on factors shaping school outcomes in favor of anecdotes and misunderstandings about issues in education. This manuscript argues “information pollution” relative to U.S. politics and policy is presently at crisis levels, and that it is particularly acute relative to education policy. In this policy area, we show how special interests are using (mis)information strategies to purportedly elevate parent voices but are in effect promoting the interests of private actors

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and de-professionalizing both expertise and educators. We seek to understand this major issue, placing it within a broader sociopolitical context. The concluding discussion considers what might be required to move in a healthier direction that would bring U.S. education policy and practice into closer alignment with evidence and expertise.

Keywords: education policy; education reform; teaching; expertise; information utilization

Contaminación de la información en una era de política populista

Resumen: La creciente influencia de los intereses privados en las políticas públicas se ha visto facilitada por un crecimiento en las fuentes de información y conocimientos “alternativos.” En educación, los maestros y las escuelas son a menudo los objetivos de estas fuentes. Esto se ha asociado con una nueva economía política donde los intereses privados impulsan las agendas de reforma en gran medida a través de la financiación de nuevas fuentes de información que ignoran la evidencia empírica de larga data sobre los factores que dan forma a los resultados escolares a favor de las anécdotas y los malentendidos sobre los problemas de la educación. Este manuscrito argumenta que la “contaminación de la información” relativa a la política/política de EE.UU. se encuentra actualmente en niveles de crisis, y que es particularmente aguda en relación con la política educativa. En esta área de política, mostramos cómo los intereses especiales están utilizando estrategias de (des)información para supuestamente elevar las voces de los padres, pero en realidad están promoviendo los intereses de los actores privados y desprofesionalizando tanto a los expertos como a los educadores. Buscamos comprender este gran tema, ubicándolo dentro de un contexto sociopolítico más amplio. La discusión final considera lo que podría ser necesario para avanzar en una dirección más saludable que haría que la política y la práctica educativa de los EE. UU. estuvieran más alineadas con la evidencia y la experiencia.

Palabras clave: política educativa; reforma educativa; enseñando; pericia; utilización de la información

Poluição da informação em uma era de política populista

Resumo: A crescente influência dos interesses privados nas políticas públicas tem sido facilitada pelo crescimento das fontes de informação e expertise “alternativas.” Na educação, professores e escolas são frequentemente os alvos dessas fontes. Isso tem sido associado a uma nova economia política em que os interesses privados promovem as agendas de reforma em grande parte por meio do financiamento de novas fontes de informação que ignoram evidências empíricas de longa data sobre fatores que moldam os resultados escolares em favor de anedotas e mal-entendidos sobre questões educacionais. Este manuscrito argumenta que a “poluição da informação” relativa à política/política dos EUA está atualmente em níveis de crise e que é particularmente aguda em relação à política educacional. Nesta área de política, mostramos como os interesses especiais estão usando estratégias de (des)informação para supostamente elevar as vozes dos pais, mas na verdade estão promovendo os interesses de atores privados e desprofissionalizando especialistas e educadores. Buscamos compreender essa grande questão, inserindo-a em um contexto sociopolítico mais amplo. A discussão final considera o que pode ser necessário para avançar em uma direção mais saudável que aproxime a política e a prática educacional dos EUA com as evidências e a experiência.

Palavras-chave: política educacional; reforma educacional; ensino; perícia; utilização da informação

Information Pollution in an Age of Populist Politics

In public policy in general, and in education reform in particular, the United States is seeing an increasing influence of private interests that rely on mis- and disinformation to advance their policy agendas. A primary target of this phenomenon is educators and the schools they serve. The strategy of attacking teachers has gained popularity in recent decades, but in focusing on schools, it ignores long-standing empirical evidence on the multiple factors shaping school outcomes. This strategy is enabled in a new political economy of evidence production and dissemination that elevates “alternative” sources of information while undercutting established forms of evidence and expertise.

The changing political economy of information is appealing to many (Lubienski, 2008). While institutions have been established to offer crucial insights into key policy questions, the decline of trust in institutions and the rise of “alternative” sources of information and expertise have upset established modes of knowledge production, transmission, and use (Jabbar, et al., 2014; Lubienski et al., 2014). Indeed, in the United States, there is a long-standing suspicion of elites and expert knowledge, so that the media’s “democratization” allows multiple voices to be amplified even when they have little grounding in fact (Lubienski, 2019; Lubienski et al., 2014). This also raises concerns about public policy based in ideological agendas that run counter to evidence showing their detrimental effects, especially on the most disadvantaged populations. In this analysis, we examine the information ecosystem that is shaping education policy, focusing on the strategies that are evident in promoting alternative forms of “facts.”

We argue that “information pollution” in U.S. politics/policy is presently at crisis levels, and this issue is particularly acute and consequential in the area of education policy. In this area, we focus particularly on how special interests are using (mis)information strategies to purportedly elevate parent voices but are in effect promoting the interests of private actors and de-professionalizing educators and expertise. We seek to understand this issue by placing these processes around information on teaching and schooling within a broader sociopolitical context and within the new political economy of information dissemination. The concluding discussion considers what might be required to move in a healthier direction that would bring U.S. education policy and practice into closer alignment with evidence and expertise.

Defining/Understanding Information Pollution

Information pollution refers to situations where the information supply is contaminated with low-value (e.g., irrelevant, redundant, inaccurate) material (Orman, 1984). It includes instances of misinformation and disinformation,¹ but here is considered as an overall, cumulative status; we use it to describe a milieu in which a glut of contaminated information routinely threatens to distort “beliefs, behavior, and policy” (Van Bavel et al., 2021, p. 84). This article argues the information supply around education/education policy in the United States is deeply contaminated, with serious consequences at the level of deliberation and decision-making, and relative to downstream student

¹ *Misinformation* refers to false information being shared with the intent to inform (i.e., by a messenger who is unaware they are sharing inaccurate information). *Disinformation* refers to instances in which a messenger shares information they know to be false, with an intent to deceive (see Kendeou et al., 2019). One type of disinformation is *fake news*, which refers to “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). Information pollution has typically also been exemplified by digital materials, including things such as junk email, but here our focus is upon pollution propagated via new and traditional media communications and via elite influence.

outcomes. As compared to other areas, we point to several overlaps, but also show how certain features (e.g., weaker research infrastructure, state-level policy action, strong elite-level interest in education reform) render education especially susceptible to contamination.

Information Pollution: The Macro Context

Information pollution has become a key feature of the modern information landscape, often nurtured and disseminated through new media forms and by actors who prioritize political ends over factual means. Examples from around the globe exemplify this trend. The Russian disinformation shop in St. Petersburg, the successful efforts to spread disinformation around the British “Brexit” vote, ethnic animosity fostered over WhatsApp in India, control and manipulation of information by authoritarian regimes, and vaccine denialism in Brazil and the United States all point to the growth of this phenomenon in the internet age. The United States in particular is a country with established institutions centered on objective evidence (such as the National Academies, lauded universities, and respected professions characterized by expertise) on the one hand, and, on the other, profound commitment to free press and free speech, traditions of anti-intellectualism and suspicion of authority, and “democratized” means of communication that present fertile ground for the new political economy of information. This section details several macro features/trends bearing upon contemporary U.S. information ecology. These interrelated features—including immense income/wealth inequality, elite-level political dominance, divisive politics, and media vulnerability and transformation—can help us to understand the information pollution that presently exists.

The United States is unique among rich nations² in the magnitude of its income and wealth inequalities: Particularly in the past four decades, income has “skyrocketed for those at the very top of the . . . distribution” but not for other members of society (Saez & Zucman, 2019, p. 6). Extreme inequality presents major challenges to democracies, whose functioning relies “on the notion that even in large and diverse societies where fundamental differences are inevitable, most citizens will come to have reconcilable economic interests” (Hacker & Pierson, 2020, p. 19). As economic polarization increases, it becomes more challenging to identify and act on shared interests. This is largely because systemic changes (which would benefit most citizens) may be required, but these are invariably opposed by the status-quo favoring rich (Giridharadas, 2018). Because affluence also brings disproportionate power and influence in the United States (as detailed subsequently), it becomes exceedingly difficult to forge an actionable consensus around necessary policy changes. In fact, elites³ in highly unequal societies tend to grow increasingly fearful of popular challenges to their interests, so much so that they may even view *democracy* as a threat (Hacker & Pierson, 2020). Accordingly, they show an openness to increasingly aggressive (albeit also covert, when possible) political influence tactics, radical policy alternatives, and divisive rhetorical and political strategies, such as using cultural wedge issues to persuade people to vote against their own economic interests (Frank, 2004; McGhee, 2022).

Though U.S. elites can hold a variety of political positions and indeed can be progressive on social issues, they are economically more conservative than others (Frank, 2004; Page et al., 2013). Particularly those with extreme wealth (e.g., the top 1%) are found to be “much more conservative than the American public as a whole with respect to important policies concerning taxation,

² Although inequality is a global phenomenon, the extreme size of inequalities and the rates at which they are increasing in the United States are unparalleled among developed nations.

³ In this manuscript, “elites” refers to those Americans who hold disproportionately high levels of wealth and political power.

economic regulation, and especially social welfare programs” (Page et al., 2013, p. 51). These distinctions have material consequences: Empirical research reveals that policy outcomes in the United States are highly responsive to elite preferences, while being independent of those of average citizens (Gilens & Page, 2014).

Though the mechanisms behind elites’ outsized influence are not fully clear, we contend a considerable factor relates to their production/dissemination of information pollution that aligns with or can otherwise support (e.g., via distraction and division) their preferences. In this information age, the susceptibility of the United States to private interests is particularly notable. Not only are ideas and (mis)information easily propagated through social media with few quality-control measures, but the United States has developed a system where think tanks and political institutions are relatively open to private resources—encouraged by tax structures that reward and often obscure private contributions—that seek to set the policy agenda and public discourse. Some of this is done by funding alternative new sources such as NewsMax, OANN, Parler, and countless websites, or by promoting “fake news” through social media that peddle in “alternative facts,” in the famous phrasing of Donald Trump’s Press Secretary, aimed at “low-information” voters. As examples, we have recently seen baseless and far-reaching challenges to legitimate election results, the pursuit by some elites and politicians to diminish certain citizens’ voting rights, and efforts to weed out critical race theory from schools where it has never been taught. We see frequent, overt appeals to stoke racial and cultural resentment, including directly from former-President Trump, and subsequent efforts to use “thought-leaders” to promote “alternative facts” that support not only political agendas but lies and (mis)statements by political leaders.

Hacker and Pierson (2020) describe a “conservative dilemma” (p. 21) facing conservative parties (e.g., the United States’ Republican Party or “GOP”), which is especially challenging to navigate in highly unequal societies: Modern-day conservative parties are caught in a bind “between a commitment to economic elites” and the “need to win elections” (pp. 21–22); this challenge is particularly difficult to reconcile with an expanding and diversifying electorate (Hacker & Pierson, 2020). As a tenuous solution, the GOP has embraced a peculiar variant of right-wing populism, which Hacker and Pierson call “plutocratic populism” (2020, p. 5). This approach⁴ consists of a “bitter brew of reactionary economic priorities and right-wing cultural and racial appeals” (p. 5). In other words, rather than meaningfully respond to ordinary Americans’ needs through policies that would appeal to voters, the GOP has embraced a strategy of “division and distraction” (p. 5). Thus, we see enormous attention being paid toward the “existential crisis” posed by the supposed teaching of critical race theory, rather than toward the actual crisis posed by accelerating climate change or toward thoroughly and responsibly covering COVID-19 vaccine efficacy research.

This strategy deeply affects the information ecology; the United States has been trapped in endless loops of reporting on the latest Tweet, controversy, or outrage, even as on policy substance (e.g., the Republican-led passage of massive tax cuts that disproportionately favored the richest Americans; Saez & Zucman, 2019) the GOP has managed to maintain and further its elite-favoring agenda (Frank, 2004). That is, rather than pursue greater numbers of voters by embracing policies that favor the common person, the GOP has decided to engage in culture warfare and voter suppression, both largely based on mass misinformation. To summarize, division and distraction are major components of the information pollution experienced by citizens and policymakers.

⁴ Like Frank, our understanding of populism in this article is not as a specific movement but rather as “a more general political style that emphasizes class antagonism and the nobility of the common man” (2004, p. 32). Hacker and Pierson (2020) build on this understanding and show how elites are applying this approach to resolve a key dilemma they are facing.

Meanwhile, the media landscape has shifted markedly: Recent decades have seen increased vulnerability within traditional media, including the shuttering or deterioration of many local and regional newspapers—often as these trusted news outlets are replaced by propaganda sites posing as local sources (Gabbatt, 2019). These shifts alone have a major and particularly detrimental effect on information quality in policy areas (like education) that are chiefly state and local matters; few newspapers can currently afford to have statehouse reporter/s and generally are poorly positioned to adequately cover important state policy matters (Anderson & Donchik, 2016). Simultaneously, we have seen the explosion of new and low-quality news and fake news sources, the blending of entertainment and politics, the advent/acceleration of social media, and the fragmentation of media news sources to fit various political perspectives (Ksiazek, 2019).

These and other changes to the media landscape hold implications for policy influencers, who can now arm themselves with information “ammunition”—whether accurate or not—that fits their agenda, directly inject their views and ideas to the public free of quality control (i.e., via social media), and/or easily access media sources (and, by extension, audiences) that align with their ideological bent (Drezner, 2017; Malin & Lubienski, 2015). Accordingly, early optimism that democratized knowledge and a “wisdom of the crowds” that would flow from new digital media has largely been replaced by concern/panic as these technologies are routinely being leveraged to spread false information (Malin & Hornbeck, 2021; Persily & Tucker, 2020). Meanwhile, organized actors can more easily exploit remaining/weakened traditional media sources, which are often hungry for editorial content and might be reluctant to question those initiatives favored by the same elites who they rely on for advertising and other financial supports (Malin, Lubienski et al., 2020). Accordingly, traditional media often function as “inert, non-critical vessel[s] of political messages” (Malin, Lubienski et al., 2020, p. 135), while the growing (and asymmetrical) partisan media sector creates and/or amplifies overtly political messages, with little to no consideration of truth value. Meanwhile, the internet and social media offer limitless opportunities for engaging in political communications, mostly free of gatekeeping and enabling far-flung propagation of all forms of information pollution.

A vast infrastructure representing elite and radical conservative interests is in place and can be leveraged to exploit this changed media landscape through active, orchestrated, ongoing work at defining and framing issues, problems, and solutions (Brock, 2004; Landman, 2010; Parry, 1995). Networked intermediary organizations—including advocacy groups, think tanks, and media outlets—play pivotal roles, seeking to move public opinion in manners consistent with their preferences. The bold aim has thus been to change how politicians and members of the public think (Mayer, 2016). In this realm, again, elite conservatives’ interests have been disproportionately influential. They have been more successful in getting uptake for their preferred ideas, owing to decades of organized work and considerable (and largely opaque) elite funding (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Mayer, 2016; Malin & Tan, in press). Recent research underscores such asymmetric media patterns: partisan conservative media is less constrained by journalistic norms, features more fake websites and hyperpartisan content, and even its mainstream outlets often amplify extreme/misleading content (Benkler et al., 2018; Malin & Hornbeck, 2021).

This organized, asymmetrical influence is key to understanding contemporary information pollution writ large in the United States. For example, when an idea is repeatedly presented, it may come to be taken as common sense, and can become normalized regardless of its underlying truth value (Pierre, n.d.; Ratner, 2019; Stafford, 2016). Trump and his allies’ “big lie”—in which he/they repeatedly asserted, without evidence, that there had been massive election fraud—provides a high-profile illustration of this phenomenon, and of its serious consequences in a democracy.

Compounding this issue, although elite-backed ideas are presented as noble and principled, invariably they are “seamlessly dovetailed” with their benefactors’ business and corporate interests

(Mayer, 2016, p. 89): invariably, they support less/smaller government (including via lower and/or less progressive taxation), the privatization of public services, and fewer regulations on business and industry (Leonard, 2019; Mayer, 2016). Accordingly, a consistent and essential strategy has been to employ subterfuge; that is, to exert a desired influence while not unduly raising concerns related to funding sources and underlying motives—a strategy allowed under US privacy laws that shield “dark money” donations from scrutiny (Mayer, 2016). In short, their ideas have needed to be packaged and presented tactically and from various quarters—including from elite higher education “beachheads” like the Hoover Institution at Stanford, or the evangelical Patrick Henry College, or Liberty University and its Falkirk Center (Mayer, 2016). The broad focus has been on “creating, selling, and injecting deeply conservative ideas into the American mainstream” (p. 77)—indeed, to change how both politicians and members of the public *think* (Mayer, 2016). Quite frequently, as we detail in the next section, these ideas have concerned the US education system and how, from their perspective, it ought to be reformed or “disrupted” (Christensen et al., 2008).

There are also softer and unintentional, but perhaps equally damaging, sources and manifestations of information pollution flowing from large/increasing power asymmetries in the United States. Giridharadas (2018) describes how elites—including ostensibly progressive ones who may not be active within/behind conservative influence networks—invariably have clear financial stakes in burnishing their reputations, and/or in identifying “solutions” that do not disrupt the social order. Such individuals might predictably then be drawn to subsidize and host activities (e.g., annual meetings/gatherings, TED talks, etc.) featuring individual/psychology focused improvement approaches while ignoring/neglecting examinations of structural problems and solutions that might call into question the existing order.

Ultimately, we contend these features work hand in hand: they have, for instance, created conditions in which public intellectuals (who are often critical of existing structures) have seen their influence decline, whereas “thought leaders” (who tend to favor more individual-level, feel-good solutions) have seen their influence increase (Drezner, 2017). The latter group has been subsidized by wealthy elites, who—irrespective of their views on social issues—typically have quite conservative economic preferences and clear financial stakes in identifying relatively superficial “solutions” (Giridharadas, 2018) while ignoring or minimizing structural problems and how they might be rectified. Of particular salience given this paper’s focus, these elites increasingly and through various means exert outsized overt and covert influence over media and policy in education.

Information Pollution in the U.S. Education Policy Space

Information pollution has been a consistent strategy in education reform in the United States for decades, if not longer. In particular, reformers have often strategically selected information useful to the idea of presenting a crisis around schooling in order to advance their agendas for education, and—especially more recently—have sometimes misrepresented evidence to advance the crisis narrative in the public imagination and policy discourse (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 1997, 1999, 2000a, 2000b). Even going back to the advent of public or “common” schools in the United States, reformers like Horace Mann compiled evidence on apparent social and economic crises associated with rapid urbanization, immigration, and industrialization in arguing that mass schooling was needed. Likewise, at least since the early 20th century, business leaders pointed to evidence that schools were “failing” in order to make the case for shifting employee training costs to public schools, while social reformers claimed that schools’ failure to address social issues was causing social problems (Gelberg, 1997).

Certainly, “crises” such as the launching of Sputnik were used to point to the “failure” of schools (just as they contributed to the myth of Soviet nuclear superiority) and advance reform agendas for them. In one entertaining example from the past, the common refrain from the right that public schools were dangerous was apparently backed up by an earlier study cited by politicians (including a presidential candidate) and a respected national syndicated columnist, and is often used to motivate potential homeschoolers (e.g., Ballmann, 1995).⁵ However, the “study” was actually just the recollections of a convicted murderer from his own childhood in the 1940s compared to what he was seeing in the newspapers decades later, which was then presented as empirical evidence by conservative textbook activists intent on portraying schools as violent since school prayer was no longer mandatory (O’Neill, 1994). This case illustrates how policy elites have been eager to attack public schools even if it means overlooking the highly questionable nature of the evidence they use to support their position so long as it fits their narrative. But in more recent decades, with the proliferation of “alternative” information sources, policymakers and the public have been presented with, and advanced, information of questionable accuracy to target teachers and schools in the United States. In particular, the claim that public school teachers are failing to teach, much less control their classrooms, has been asserted as a national narrative, even as research indicates that this portrayal is largely off base (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014).

This section provides context around, and examples of, information pollution pertaining specifically to the contemporary US education policy space. The first subsection focuses on how the education policy space differs from others, as it relates to this topic, and describes some transcendent, elite-advanced perspectives regarding US public education/educators. The second subsection present two examples in which substantial information pollution has been leveraged to advance policy agendas: namely, that (1) public schools are failing and thus need to be privatized, and (2) public school teachers are harmfully teaching critical race theory to their students.

How Is Education Similar and Distinct?

Education policy, although unremarkable in some respects, is also distinctive in ways we argue render it more susceptible to and suffused with information pollution. This section addresses some of these.

One important characteristic of education is that nearly everyone has had some direct experience with it (e.g., as a student, parent, or one of the three million-plus people who work in the sector; Garcia, 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2016); accordingly, many perspectives can be (and often are) put forth as knowledgeable opinions:

Indeed, no other profession is so large and so public, directly engaging virtually everyone in the society. Most people have opinions about education that are informed at a minimum by personal experience. For these reasons, the notion of expertise may not have the same meaning as it does in other professions that are less directly accessible to the public, such as medicine, architecture, or engineering. (McLaughlin et al., 2016, p. 136)

This idea that “everyone’s an expert by experience”—evident in the homeschooling and school choice movements in the United States—undercuts the value of expertise by training and evidence. Relatedly, the idea of “local control” has shaped much of US education policy and governance since its inception. While this democratizes schooling by bringing voice to multiple constituencies, it can also lead to the non-use of knowledge based on larger-scale research in favor of local, “front-line”

⁵ The study purportedly found that, in 1940, the “top offenses” in classrooms included chewing gum, talking out of turn, and stepping out of line; in more recent years, those “top offenses” had changed to making bombs, drugs, etc. (Gabler et al., 1985).

anecdotes and insights; indeed, education is subject to a democratic/populist impulse that often privileges cultural politics issues over technical expertise (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014). In practice, education has fewer agreed upon truths and shared definitions of problems and solutions than other professions like law or medicine (Willingham, 2012). This is in part a reflection of complexities/contingencies related to teaching and learning. It also relates to competing/conflicting goals, multiple competing constituencies, and an underdeveloped research infrastructure from which to establish firm bodies of knowledge (Labaree, 1997; Lubienski, 2020; Malin, Brown et al., 2020).

Education policy influence has also widely shifted. Since the early/mid 1980s, education has been consistently and repeatedly portrayed as being in crisis, with educators framed as major parts of the problem (and, therefore, not “experts” who should be influential and valued for their ideas and experiences). In their stead have been business leaders, think tank researchers, foundation heads, and so on (Fowler, 2013). Accordingly, traditional educational policy actors have seen their influence diminish, whereas others, especially in the private and philanthropic spheres, have become considerably more influential (Au & Lubienski, 2016; DeBray, 2006; Lubienski, Brewer & LaLonde, 2016; Lubienski & Hedges, 2020; Reckhow, 2013; Rich, 2004).

Various motivations appear to be operative among those supporting a relatively uniform reform movement, which has been particularly focused on promoting standards, testing and external accountability, and educational privatization (Apple, 2013; DeBray, 2006; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Ellison et al., 2018). For many, connections to the influence infrastructure described in the preceding section are key. As public education is typically the largest state expenditure, organizations/networks aimed at reducing the size of government, lowering taxes, or privatizing services understandably focus on educational policy (Underwood & Mead, 2012). Likewise, these operators have shown particularly strong interest in system-changing reforms that they view as having desirable long-term ramifications (e.g., right-to-work laws affecting teacher unionization and/or large-scale school voucher programs; Hertel-Fernandez, 2019; Malin et al., 2019). Such reforms are ideologically driven, viewed by elites as yielding them strategic long-term political and economic benefits. As might be expected, such reforms have been aggressively pursued across states (undergirded by cross-state advocacy and influence networks), and with several successes (albeit most frequently in states where Republicans were in full control).

More pervasive still, and sometimes driving well-intentioned reform efforts, is a belief system that Hanauer (2019) describes as being widespread among the nation’s wealthiest—that “both poverty and rising inequality are largely consequences of America’s failing education,” and thus that educational fixes “could cure much of what ails America” (para. 1). This view, which Hanauer calls “educationism” (para. 2), largely fits within the longstanding, deeply flawed portrayal of a system in crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). As Hanauer (2019) details, 40 of the United States’ 50 largest family foundations declare education a key issue, versus just one of these that “mentions anything about the blight of working people, economic inequality, or wages” (para. 9) And, because these Americans are so politically powerful, the consequences are profound. These beliefs have enabled reform proponents to push several flawed policy solutions while ignoring authentic, pressing problems facing schools and society (and, as such, contributing to the information pollution problem we seek to understand). In Hanauer’s analysis:

Educationism appeals to the wealthy and powerful because it tells us what we want to hear: that we can help restore shared prosperity without sharing our wealth or power. As Anand Giridharadas explains. . . narratives like this one let the wealthy feel good about ourselves. By distracting from the true causes of economic inequality, they also defend America’s grossly unequal status quo (para. 25).

The education sector, as with all others, now must compete for any attention within today's high-speed, "distract and divide" information environment. Most often, education fares poorly, with key details and discussions about education not being well-covered. In education, as noted, key policy action occurs at state and local levels, where it is especially rare to see in-depth coverage of substantive policy issues. As noted previously, these media are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by organized interests. Moreover, with increasingly nationalized political behavior (Hopkins, 2018) and nearly hourly national-level distractions, there just is not public appetite left for understanding/debating the fine points of education policy matters. Thus, it is difficult for citizens and policymakers to make heads or tails of key policy discussions, and it is easy for special interests to exert outsized influence (e.g., by framing and advancing reform ideas and policies via op-eds, organizing rallies, commissioning and publicizing "polls"; Malin, Lubienski et al., 2020). As we show in the next subsection, slogans and half-baked, shifting ideas tend to far outweigh evidence-grounded coverage and discussion.

Undergirding and supporting recommended reforms has been the pathologization and marginalization of teachers/educators from political debate, and especially urban teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Within policy discourses and various media, teachers have increasingly been set at the lowest rung of the policy hierarchy as these reforms have been pursued (Ellison et al., 2018; Ryan & Bourke, 2013). Teachers have been presented as being replete with deficits, resistant to change, and lacking authority and skill to make necessary changes and elevate professional standards (see Ellison et al., 2018).

Altogether, we can see that education is an area of immense interest to many of society's most rich and powerful, and we have some sense of why this is so. To a large extent, the reform movement here has mirrored what can be found in other areas—including, for instance, a consistent and overarching aversion to taxes and the regulation of private industry, a sustained and escalating effort to privatize formerly public services, and, more generally, commitments to denigrate government(s) and government employees such as public-school teachers. These commonalities enable us to understand how/why these new actors have been able to infiltrate education and other spheres and to exert such a powerful and crosscutting policy influence. However, we have also described why the situation in education is particularly precarious and vulnerable to information pollution. These include: the venues in which policy is made (primarily state/local); inadequate research infrastructure; multiple/competing goals; the tantalizing nature of educationism to elites; and a sidelining of educators and others who have legitimate expertise to contribute.

The next section provides two brief examples that highlight how mis- and disinformation is entering into and polluting this policy space. The point here is not to prove or disprove any argument about the efficacy of these policies themselves (indeed, readers are encouraged to dig more deeply into the available evidence on these topics than we have room to do here), but instead to illustrate the patterns of problematic treatment of evidence by some elites who engage in policy advocacy.

Information Pollution in Education: Two Examples

In our first example, we highlight the narrative that US public school educators are failing, which is often used to advance the notion that privatized school options represent a better alternative for taxpayer funding. Of course, as noted above, the United States has a long history of attacking schools and teachers, evident not only in policy discourse, but also in popular culture, as with movies like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Won't Back Down*, and *Bad Teacher*. But in the policy sphere, assumptions about the ineffectiveness of public school teachers have become more pronounced with the advent of the accountability and standards movements. Federal policies such as A Nation at

Risk, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top have elevated educators and schools as the prime targets for scrutiny, focusing on school and teacher (in)effectiveness. More recently, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former New York School Chancellor Joel Klein argued that systematic failure of schools “puts us on a trajectory toward massive failure,” placing national security and economic prosperity at risk unless meaningful “school choice” is implemented (Klein et al., 2012).

In doing this, policy advocates have de-emphasized established and voluminous research that identifies myriad socioeconomic factors shaping student outcomes (Coleman, 1966; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Rothstein, 2004), and often point instead to questionable (or misused) sources of information that contribute to a narrative of failing public schools (Berliner & Glass, 2014). It is quite common to see policymakers refer to large-scale assessments, even when they were not designed to support such uses, to claim that public schools are failing and, therefore, drastic measures need to be implemented “for the children” (Klein et al., 2012; Rice & Klein, 2012)—a process known as “scandalization” (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2018). Other policy advocates cast schools as “drop-out factories” (Chavous, 2012; Zehr, 2010) or create lists of arbitrary information that they say a student “should” know, often based on cultural or international comparative grounds, or compared to what they claim previous generations knew (Hirsch, 1988; Ravitch & Finn, 1987).

Many if not most of such attacks are used to advance school choice systems, such as charter schools or vouchers for private schools, as a preferable alternative to “failing” public schools. Yet the whole premise of the case that public schools are underperforming compared to independent and private schools is not supported by the empirical evidence, as demonstrated in multiple large-scale studies in recent years (Braun et al., 2006; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Pianta & Ansari, 2018). Indeed, recent research on the effects of these reforms, including some conducted by advocates, shows large negative impacts on student learning (Boser et al., 2018; Dynarski & Nichols, 2017; Lubienski & Brewer, 2016; Lubienski & Malin, 2021).

Consequently, we have seen advocates change the objectives they had set out to measure the success of these programs (Lubienski & Malin, 2021), or direct substantial attention to other alternatives, presenting evidence of their success. For example, when voucher programs started to show negative impacts, some voucher advocates switched their focus to charter schools (Shakeel & Peterson, 2020), drawing substantial media attention from outlets funded by their policy allies to their claim that these types of choice schools were producing greater student learning gains (Jacobson, 2020), even though their data do not really allow for such inferences (Ni & Han, 2020).

But what is often more strategic and compelling in popular and policy discussions than statistical data on achievement is the anecdote. Advocating for school reform based on personal stories is a persuasive and pervasive tactic evident in legislative hearings, marketing campaigns, and Hollywood movies. The film *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010) presents a textbook case of how this is done. Repeating the claims about failing public schools, the film follows a small set of poor but eager students who seek options outside of their neighborhood school. Financed by a conservative former oil executive and screened at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions, the film casts teachers and their unions as impediments to quality education for poor children, and leverages the dramatic device of children waiting eagerly for their number to be called during an admissions lottery. One would need to have a cold heart not to feel sympathy for these children and, by extension, the policy solution promoted by the filmmaker: parents’ choice of schools through charter or voucher programs.⁶

⁶ Although the film is more explicit about charter schools as a solution, it celebrates former Washington, D.C., superintendent Michelle Rhee for her efforts to push back against teachers’ unions; Rhee has subsequently become a leading proponent for school vouchers.

Whether through problematic use of quantitative data or anecdotes, this policy agenda advances by using “evidence” to attack the performance of public schools while implicitly or explicitly promoting ideas of consumer-style choice of schools, and autonomy and deregulation for schools. Although some have claimed that these policies promote educational privatization (Ravitch, 2013), and in some instances that may be true, a more pronounced factor in policies such as charter schools and vouchers is marketization: creating market-like, competitive environments for organizations and individuals (teachers) ostensibly for the purpose of helping underserved children—even though there is scarce evidence to support assumptions about the superiority of that model.

Numerous policy actors are advancing this case. Certainly, leading policymakers like former Democratic Representative George Miller and Republican Senator Ted Cruz have advanced this agenda, often drawing on information from think tanks and other sources. Established think tanks like the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation, and newer policy players like the Center for Education Reform and the Heartland Institute, produce reports and other publications advancing this agenda. Similar functions are served by university-based researchers at places like the Hoover Institution at Stanford, the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard, and the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. Many of these activities are funded by conservative and neoliberal sources such as the Walton and Gates Foundations (Au & Lubienski, 2016; Reckhow, 2013). At the same time, anecdotes and the promotion of agreeable evidence are promoted by allied media outlets such as Walden Media, The 74, and Choice TV, and on social media.

Yet much of the information such entities bring to advance this agenda is problematic in its use of evidence. This is not simply a case of competing interpretations of evidence, but instead suggests a willful effort to find evidence supporting the agenda, and obfuscate or dissemble around evidence that calls the effects of that agenda into question (Lubienski & Malin, 2019, 2021). For instance, when larger-scale evaluations demonstrated negative impacts of voucher programs on student achievement, prominent researchers and advocates who had spent decades promoting vouchers on the basis of tenuous claims of achievement gains started to argue that achievement scores are no longer important (Lubienski & Malin, 2021; Malin, Lubienski et al., 2020), thereby “polluting” the policy space around this issue. Indeed, many make the populist argument that learning metrics are unimportant because, they claim, disadvantaged communities want choice—neglecting to mention the elite support for this agenda.

As a second example, we turn to ongoing controversy over the supposed teaching of critical race theory (CRT)⁷ in U.S. public schools. Two immediate issues are as follows: (1) CRT as it is being presented—e.g., in its 1,860 mentions on *Fox News* between January 1 and June 24, 2021 (Barr, 2021)—is a false representation of what it actually is; and (2) There is little to no evidence CRT is even being taught in schools (Sawchuk, 2021). Notwithstanding, these concerns are having serious implications—as of mid-2021, dozens of state-level, Republican-led legislative efforts are underway to remedy this phony issue (Stout & Wilburn, 2021). In other words, this “issue” is suffused with information pollution, which is distorting policymaking. The facts as described above

⁷ CRT originated in the works of several legal scholars in the mid-1970s, and is used to examine social, cultural, and legal issues in relation to issues of race and racism. As a theory, it draws attention toward structural/systemic rather than individual-level prejudice. As recently as 2020, most people had never heard of CRT; in 2021, “a chorus of voices on the right insists it is an existential threat to the country” (Legum & Zekeria, 2021).

also raise further questions that, when further explored, can illuminate the nature of information pollution in/beyond the education space.

A top-level question concerns *why* this is happening. This is a complex question, but the conceptual frame introduced earlier is supportive. An attack on CRT (and associated allegations, including that “divisive concepts” and “revisionist history” are harmfully being taught), from a plutocratic populism perspective, is quite natural: allegations that students are being taught to “hate America” or feel guilty about their histories and privileges (Wallace-Wells, 2021) appear on the surface to have potential to stoke white resentment, and accordingly can support elite conservatives’ “division and distraction” strategy (Hacker & Pierson, 2020, p. 5). Moreover, CRT—given its emphasis on *structural* versus *individual*-level explanations for inequality—is indeed threatening to status quo-favoring elites (Giridharadas, 2018; Kumashiro, 2021). Such elites presumably would stand to lose the most if/when uncompromising demands for systems-level policy change were made, and indeed events since mid-2020 would have heightened elites’ fears of such a possibility: We can assume they watched warily as Black Lives Matter protests became perhaps the largest movement in national history (Buchanan et al., 2020), and as its participants connected individual-level tragedies to ongoing, structural issues and demanded change.

Indeed, substantial evidence has emerged to show that what might at first glance appear as an organic, grassroots effort to oppose or ban CRT in schools is instead very much grass-tops in nature. Wallace-Wells (2021), for *The New Yorker*, details how Christopher Rufo (senior fellow, Manhattan Institute) came to realize CRT could be reshaped into a potent political weapon:

Its connotations are all negative to most middle-class Americans, including racial minorities, who see the world as “creative” rather than “critical,” “individual” rather than “racial,” “practical” rather than “theoretical.” Strung together, the phrase “critical race theory” connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American.

Rufo went to work, publishing various pieces on CRT and, importantly, securing an appearance on Fox News’ top-rated program, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, on September 2, 2020 (Wallace-Wells, 2021). Rufo made full use of his time, falsely characterizing CRT as having “pervaded every aspect of the federal government” and calling on conservatives to “wake up. . . [to this] existential threat to the United States.” He went so far as to call on President Trump to issue an executive order banning federal CRT training (this appeal was met, and Rufo’s platform and appeals have only escalated since).

Rufo is no isolated actor. Kumashiro (2021) notes how advocacy organizations such as Parents Defending Education, which are made to appear grassroots, are elite-organized and funded. As Legum and Zekeria (2021) conclude, “a constellation of non-profit groups and media outlets. . . are systematically injecting CRT into our politics.” Likewise, Griffey (2021), writing for *Spectrum News*, describes trained, traveling activists in Texas appearing at board meetings to repeat “the same conservative talking points” in opposition to CRT and/or other hot topics such as mask policy (COVID-19). He notes how organizations such as Citizens Renewing America (led by a former Trump administration official) have been publishing anti-CRT toolkits, including tips for how to grow grassroots networks and “win back your school board.” Meanwhile, an *NBC News* analysis has identified over 165 local and national groups seeking to disrupt lessons pertaining to race and gender (Kingkade et al., 2021). They, too, conclude that these groups are being reinforced by “conservative think tanks [and] law firms,” among others. Though it is often impossible to track such groups’ funding/support in real time, some major actors in this instance are well-known, longstanding, key parts of the elite conservative infrastructure (Legum & Zakaria, 2021). Recently, for instance, Unkoch My Campus reviewed the materials of 28 conservative think tanks and political

organizations, from June 2020 to June 2021, finding “79 articles, podcasts, reports or videos about Critical Race Theory” (Banks, 2021). Well-known entities such as the Heritage Foundation and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) have held webinars/trainings regarding how to attack CRT (Banks, 2021). Indeed, mostly the same organizations behind these efforts have led earlier/ongoing efforts to otherwise reshape education in other ways (e.g., as in our first example). To summarize, ongoing attacks on CRT have been largely manufactured—via elites (though they may appear otherwise)—and the information pollution being put forth is serving to justify preferred policy changes.

Thus, both examples illustrate the ways that information can be used or abused to “pollute” the policy space in education. In both instances, elite interests use “evidence” of a threat to advance an agenda: privatization in one case, uniting the base in another. Indeed, the solutions proposed are driven more by prior ideological commitments and policy preferences than by good faith engagement with evidence—a fact driven home in the first case by goalpost moving in light of changing empirical conditions, and in the second case by vociferous, escalating efforts to draw attention to and “solve” a phony issue.

Summary and Moving Forward

This article has shown that “information pollution” relative to U.S. politics/policy is presently at crisis levels, and is particularly acute pertaining to education policy, with major implications for teaching, learning, and equity. Information pollution in the United States, writ large, is shaped by (and shapes) a set of challenging macro contemporary environmental features and conditions, including: immense income/wealth inequality, elite-level political dominance, divisive politics, and media vulnerability and transformation. In education, the situation is further complicated based upon several aspects, including: the venues where policy is made (primarily state and local); inadequate research infrastructure; multiple/competing goals; a common impulse to position education as a panacea above, and instead of, other possibilities; and a sidelining of educators and others who have real expertise to contribute. Moreover, in education, we have illustrated how issues of information pollution are—to a large extent—traceable to the efforts of interested and heavily-resourced actors who stand to benefit from such contamination.

Given this, in this section we now prognosticate about what lies ahead. We also contemplate what would be required to move in a healthier direction (i.e., toward conditions in which U.S. education policy and practice could be in closer alignment with evidence and expertise).

Looking ahead, we see both positive and negative signals, and in some regards, these are two sides of the same coin. Optimistically, we suggest politicians like Trump have vividly represented—for many—a rock bottom of sorts, one that pointed to the bankruptcy of the ideas and policies he was promoting and, as such, underlined the need for new paradigms for thinking and acting overall. Indeed, it seems clear that the GOP is undergoing an identity crisis in real time,⁸ and that the Biden/Harris administration is—at least, as we write this—taking advantage of its position as “not-Trump,” as it attempted to make bold policy moves, at least in its early days. Though one might comprehend this boldness as a mere response to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, much more appears to figure into this calculus—e.g., “the collapse of the Republican party as a negotiating partner,” generational shifts in Washington, D.C., declining trust in institutions and experts, and simple political responsiveness to Americans’ shifting beliefs and desires (see Klein,

⁸ At this time, a key question seems to hinge around whether they will double down with continued red meat for their largely white base, or make fundamental changes to moderate their politics, potentially diversifying and expanding their base, or something else altogether (i.e., party fracture).

2021, n.p.). To us, it appears large conceptual shifts are afoot, including even some longstanding “common sense” ideas (e.g., that “government is the problem”), long pushed by organized interests, that are no longer being taken as such. Indeed, we may be in an era ripe for paradigm-shifting policies, and the underlying ideas (Fandos & Wines, 2021).

At the same time, it is not hard to identify signs of continued trouble. For instance, while the Biden/Harris administration has made these moves, we simultaneously see widespread dishonesty with little accountability, perhaps best exemplified by a cross-state policy action to limit voting rights, all predicated on and driven by a “big lie” that there was massive voter fraud during the 2020 presidential election. This is a non-subtle demonstration, as was the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, of the grave threats that mis- and disinformation pose to the health and functioning of a democracy (Van Bavel et al., 2021). Even more, as yet there is little reason to believe—even if there have been some shifts in terms of public opinion and party affiliations—that any of the underlying, structural causes of information pollution have been rectified.⁹ For example, we have *not* seen substantive policy change related to the influence of money in politics, especially around education, nor considerable movement relative to news or social media regulation. Meanwhile, inequality has only accelerated during the pandemic, and there is no reason to believe interested actors will somehow wave a white flag even if they now face stronger headwinds. More likely, we can expect that they will maintain or regain dominance—albeit with some evolved messaging and likely with some new politician darlings to replace the old. In education, for instance, we are seeing vociferous attacks on teachers (and teachers’ unions) around COVID-19 reopening/safety decision-making and the supposed teaching of CRT, and a continued press across many states to expand privatization in education in various forms (e.g., building or expanding voucher programs), even as poor empirical outcomes have piled up (Lubienski & Malin, 2019). Rather than shifting the policy course, organized interests have responded by “moving the goal posts” as they seek metrics and arguments that can meet their continued advocacy needs (Lubienski & Malin, 2020, p. 14).

Thus, overall, we conclude that the same disordered information ecosystem we described remains intact, though at least some of the core ideas (i.e., anti-government, pro-privatization, anti-tax) long advanced by elite/organized influencers are being more vigorously challenged. Given the ability of money to buy outsized influence (e.g., in overt and covert politics and in the information marketplace; Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Mayer 2016; Saez & Zucman, 2019), we now assert that deep structural reforms are necessary if we wish to see discernibly reduced information pollution in education. Generally speaking, because we see these as roots of the problem, these reforms must be aimed at (1) reducing inequality; and (2) weakening the relationship between affluence and influence (Hacker & Pierson, 2020). The former must include progressive tax reforms, as well as programs aimed at strengthening the middle class, while the latter should include limiting and regulating the overt and covert flow of money into politics and influence/advocacy. Simultaneously, a strengthened educational research infrastructure (e.g., featuring robust governmental funding of rigorous research, and efforts to mobilize such knowledge to inform practice and policy) would help to decrease education’s particular vulnerability to information pollution. But just as importantly, policymakers themselves need to be willing and able to put in the effort to understand research evidence, as well as the interests of those seeking to advance agendas through the (mis)use of information. Meanwhile, direct study and action appears needed to reduce the pernicious effects of unregulated websites like Infowars, and the harmful and routine propagation of information pollution via social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (Rapp et al., 2019). Unless and until we see

⁹ However, it also appears a “global tipping point” may finally have been reached to rein in big technology (Mozur et al., 2021, n.p.). Though the motivation for doing so varies across the world, in the United States and Europe their role in the spread of misinformation is one of the topmost concerns and motivating factors.

such deep reform, we can expect a disordered information ecosystem, which in the macro is a site for a continued, unprincipled war of ideas with unequally resourced combatants. Moreover, this competition appears to bring out the worst in many who engage in it—who regularly advance sticky and oversimplistic narratives, demonize the ideological or political “enemy,” and seek conflict for clicks. Unless we make structural changes, this war of ideas will, in the long-term, be won by those with the most resources and the strongest infrastructure.

In the meantime, some smaller scale actions can be taken. On an individual level, for example, attention can be directed toward how educators and activists might navigate a disordered ecosystem, how to adopt a skeptical stance and habitually check claims and claimants, and so forth (Sinatra & Jacobson, 2019). Certain “best practices” appear to be emerging, and it seems prudent for policymakers and educators also to develop programs for students that can reliably foster such critical thinking/literacy development. For educators, it is also worthwhile to spend time devoted to understanding the structure of influence and the information ecosystem within one’s state/context of primary interest (e.g., understanding the think tanks and advocacy organizations and those who work within them, their positions on key policy matters, and their key claims [and the evidentiary basis of these claims], how they are funded, etc). Likewise, it is wise to identify and work within networks that can challenge inaccurate information and narratives, and to make timely and proactive contributions to the information marketplace around education policy matters. We generally concur with Robinson and Bligh (2019), who see a need for “more muckrakers, whistleblowers, and watchdogs to uncover. . . educational hoaxes” (p. 130). Moreover, there is a need to “defend education” (p. 130) in the face of those who characteristically identify silver-bullet fixes (e.g., charter schools) while ignoring systemic issues like student poverty (Robinson & Bligh, 2019). Ultimately, what is needed is for dominant reformers/influencers in education to be sidelined, or at least see their influence considerably diminished, relative to others (such as researchers and educators) who are willing to engage with stronger sources of evidence about the nature of educational problems and solutions. As it currently stands, the dominant group has achieved policy influence far out of proportion to their expertise (Malin & Lubienski, 2015), and invariably their reform ideas are being driven by ideological motives rather than good-faith engagement with relevant evidence.

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