

Spin Cycle: How Research Is Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools

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Title: Spin Cycle: How Research Is Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools

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Jeffrey Henig's book, *Spin Cycle: How Research is Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools*, investigates the causes of the politicization of charter school research. The impetus for his book is an article appearing on the front page, "above the fold," of the *New York Times*, in August 2004. The article described a report released, as an exclusive to the *Times*, by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) on the performance of charter schools. The AFT report detailed National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test results comparing charter schools to regular public schools obtained from the U.S. Department of Education's website. The *Times* article began, "The first national comparison of test scores among children in charter schools and regular public schools shows charter school students often doing worse than comparable students in regular public schools" (Schemo, 2004, as quoted in Henig, pp. 1-2). The article went on, Henig says, to imply "that the Bush administration, which was a vocal and active proponent of charter schools, had tried to suppress the evidence" (p. 2). Its prominent publication set off a chain of subsequent events, beginning with a full-page advertisement in the following day's *Times*, signed by well known researchers, criticizing the research methods used in the report and, by implication, the *Times*' coverage of it. The politicized chain of events then continued with an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, the rushed release of additional charter schools research, and a general degradation of civility among some researchers and activists involved the issue. As one advocate commented, "all hell broke loose" (Petrilli, quoted in Henig, p. 3)

While the *Times*' coverage of the AFT report sets the stage for the book, Henig's investigation of the politicization of charter schools research is far more wide ranging. Henig considers both the impetuses for, and the effects of, the wider politicization of charter schools research by means of thirty-six formal interviews with researchers, advocates, funders and journalists. These interviews are supplemented by further analyses of the affiliations and ideologies of the researchers involved, the news coverage received, and the funding of charter schools research over a 24 year period.

Henig's book has received extensive publicity in major press outlets including the *Boston Globe* (Henig, 2008b), the *Los Angeles Times* (Henig, 2008c), *USA Today* (Toppo, 2008), and the *Washington Post* (Matthews, 2008). This coverage is laudable and indeed enviable for a book on the politics of education and may in fact underscore just how politicized charter school research has become. These articles have reinforced the impression of this book as a fair and balanced description of the charter school research environment and news coverage of that research.

This review will not explore the accuracy of Henig's account of the politicization of this issue. Instead, it will focus on the overarching theme of Henig's book - knowledge accumulation. As Henig states, "Collective learning is expected to accumulate through cross-checking and the aggregation of evidence - not, with rare exceptions, through paradigm-busting findings from a single study that resolves past uncertainties and generates a new consensus from which to proceed" (p. 65). Thus, this review addresses how Henig's book adds to our knowledge-base on the politicization of research and, more specifically, how his book adds to the accumulation of knowledge on the role of the media in this process. As Henig himself asks, "If science can produce the goods, are the institutions of transferring knowledge to the public up to the challenge of conveying it accurately?" (p. 32).

A reviewer of the book could have other foci - on the role of foundations, for example, or the role of researchers in and out of the academy. But this essay focuses on the role of the media for three reasons. First, it is the *New York Times*' coverage of charter school research that is the catalyst for Henig's politicization tale. Second, while the media is not the only actor in Henig's story, he has made it clear in subsequent interviews and articles about the book that he sees them as bearing responsibility for negative public perceptions of education issues: "I blame the American media and public for their short attention span and their inability to focus on more than a few issues at a time.... When education does enter national political debates, it's highly polarized and not fruitful" (Henig, 2008b). Ultimately though, this essay focuses on the role that Henig's book plays in our knowledge of media impact because, while he is a keen observer of common journalistic practices, he has failed to sufficiently connect these observations to

the extant literature on media effects. As a result, the work, on its own, provides fewer theoretical and methodological insights than it might have had he made these connections explicit. Thus, this focus is taken here in order to illustrate how Henig's book helps us to understand whether the news media *do* effect perceptions of education policy issues.

The News Media as Policy Agenda Setters

There has developed, in American political science research especially, an almost unquestioned orthodoxy that the news media are to blame for growing public disengagement, ignorance of important policy issues and general mistrust of public institutions, including public schools. Henig himself locates his work within this tradition of agenda-setting or media-framing studies, which maintain that media coverage shapes how the public thinks about policy issues and politics more generally. Consistent with this line of research, Henig declares,

Objective evidence is at best only part of the process that drives policy change. How issues are framed - the concepts with which they are linked and the images and symbols to which they are attached - has much to do with how groups of citizens come to understand politics, formulate their positions on them, and decide whether to mobilize politically to support or oppose policy. (pp. 50-51)

Interviewees in Henig's study also make the same assumption about the negative role of the media. As Henig asserts,

The intense reaction to the *New York Times* report shows that the traditional print media remain an important battleground for defining issues. Absent that coverage, the AFT study would have been talked about, to be sure, but it lacked the rigor and rich data to rise above the background noise of numerous studies addressing the question of whether school choice works. (p. 179)

Thus, to some extent, Henig's theoretical location of his study is defined by his participants' actions following news coverage.

Henig's research shares some methodological similarities with the agenda-setting research. The majority of that research relies upon case studies of media coverage to analyze agenda-framing effects (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1990; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; McCombs, 2004). In these case studies, researchers utilize content analysis of media coverage in conjunction with public opinion or policy decision-making data to determine whether changes in these outcome measures are related to the content of media coverage of those issues. Rarely do these researchers engage with journalists themselves in order to identify the frames at work. Henig's study falls partially within the agenda setting tradition by using a case of news media coverage of charter school research to show how the media has politicized the issue and caused funders, researchers and policymakers to shy away from engaging seriously with it. But Henig importantly departs from these earlier agenda setting case studies by interviewing journalists themselves about the coverage they produced. What he, and we, learn from this emphasis are important discoveries.

Researchers such as Cappella and Jamieson (1997), Jamieson and Waldman (2003), McCombs (2004), and McCombs and Shaw (1972) have long argued that reporters view the world through specific lenses and that these lenses serve as frames for their reporting of the news. "Because they determine the content of news, those lenses and frames continuously shape what citizens know, understand, and believe about the world" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. xii). Therefore, in order to explain the content of the news and its effects on public knowledge, we need to examine "the various lenses through which reporters saw events and the frames they deployed as they told us stories" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. xii).

By analyzing reporters' interview responses, Henig illustrates the thinking behind their coverage and directly identifies the lenses they use to frame the story. Without this information, many would assume that the *New York Times* reporter who chose to publicize the AFT report did so because she opposed school choice or was, at the very least, pro-union. However, Henig's interview shows a much more nuanced and less partisan lens at work:

Of course, the teachers' union would have its spin on the data, and the Center for Education Reform (or the Department of Education itself) would have another spin. But part of covering this story was evaluating the data independently.... As far as I was concerned, these were U.S. government figures, not AFT figures. The AFT just happened to dig them up. (Henig interview with reporter, p. 73 - 74)

The reporter then further illustrated the veracity of this frame by sending the data out for review to a number of well-known scholars in the field before publishing her story. Thus, one lesson demonstrated by Henig is that journalistic frames cannot be reliably identified through content analysis of articles alone and that the frames identified by agenda setting research using this method may represent the frames of the researchers themselves rather than those that actual journalists employ.

Another supposed sign of framing is the language used by reporters in their coverage: "When competing sides feud over language, the vocabulary chosen and legitimized by reporters and editors is likely to both frame debates and ultimately to embody unchallenged assumptions that facilitate some arguments and undercut others" (Jamieson & Waldman, p. xiv). Henig investigates whether the language used by reporters and their editors favors one side over the other.

To understand whether media preferences impacted coverage of charter school research, Henig focused on coverage in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* from 1980 to 2004. Henig focused on these two papers because “the differences in the political leanings of their editorial stances - with the *Times* generally more liberal and the *Journal* more conservative - provide an opportunity to test the extent to which editorial stance may infiltrate news coverage” (p. 186). Examining the 88 articles from both papers across that time span that made substantial reference to research on charter schools, Henig coded both main headlines and content, separately, as supporting, opposing or being neutral on charter schools.

Henig found no evidence that the headlines or content of news stories in either paper drifted toward the editorial stance of the paper, nor did he find that the headlines distilled mixed research findings into simpler pro- or con stances. “There are differences, for example, in the way that the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* present research on charter schools, but they are not sharp and do not deeply penetrate their news coverage” (p. 179). While this contradicts the agenda setting findings, it is consistent with more systematic research on media bias. For example, D’Alessio and Allen (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of fifty-nine studies and, similarly to Henig, found no media bias in newspaper coverage.

And yet Henig makes the case that while the content itself may not be biased, the coverage still remains politicized. “I argue that the media do play a role in polarizing research, but that it is less intentional and direct than cynics imagine” (p. 12). Henig demonstrates that it is not how news stories are framed through language that leads to politicization of education issues, but how they are structured. The agenda setting researchers have often concluded that journalists have preferences toward objectivity, even-handedness and balance that influences the structures of their stories, resulting in what others have called “strategic coverage” (Capella & Jamieson, 1997). In this style of reporting, journalists focus on the tactics and positions of those involved, leading to a “he said/she said” reporting style that does not address who is correct or how we might know, and instead addresses questions about who is involved and what is their motive or interest in the issue. Thus, the professional, journalistic tendency toward fairness creates a structure for reporting these issues that makes them appear polarized or black and white rather than complex and gray.

Henig’s interviewees certainly believed this kind of strategic framing had taken place in the charter school research news stories. For example, one researcher stated,

[reporters] want sort of these pithy, succinct statements that again are usually gross simplifications of the truth and they will try to get you to say something like that so that they can write it down. And they want balance. But the thing is they don’t want balance from you. (p. 177)

However, in analyzing articles that used multiple experts, Henig finds that “a starkly polarized use of researchers, featuring at least one taking an unambiguously positive and one an unambiguously negative stance, was relatively rare, occurring in only 11.6 percent of the articles” (p. 195). Henig thus concludes, “to the extent that the media contribute to a polarized public discourse, then, it is not by consistently presenting clashing warriors” (p. 195). So, why does he claim that the coverage is still structurally polarizing?

Henig goes further than the agenda setting researchers have previously gone to consider the types of articles in which research is discussed and the types, and orientations of, experts used in the coverage. Thus, while Henig does not substantiate the strategic claims made by the agenda setting researchers, his analysis does uncover other structural features of the coverage. When charter school research was presented in a *news* article, there was no evidence that the content reflected a pro- or con stance on the issues through strategic coverage. Not unexpectedly, when the coverage came in the form of op-eds, editorials, letters to the editor, and book reviews, a stance emerged. “Across both papers, as one might expect, these non-news formats are much more likely to use research to stake out a position on one side or another” (p. 190).

Because of the presumed framing process which journalists employ, their coverage is typically seen by agenda setting researchers as being subject to hijack by other politically savvy actors. “The fact that news frames help determine what the public knows and believes opens opportunities for interested parties to exert influence by advancing some frames and downplaying others” (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p. xiii). Henig does not show that the media are “spun” by the preferences of traditional political actors, but he reveals that journalists are subject to being “spun” by aggressive researchers. Quoting a journalist,

Now a number of researchers go directly to the media.... if you connect that with journalists’ sort of lack of knowledge about research and it becomes the person who is the best salesperson who gets their story in the paper. (p. 192)

Henig tests this assumption by looking at the way experts are used in both the *Times* and the *Journal* articles analyzed. He finds that with regard to experts, “Many are called, but few are called often: eighty-nine experts appeared at least once, with sixty-nine of these (77.5 percent) appearing only once. Twelve experts appear more than twice” (p. 192). These twelve experts therefore account for 40 percent of the coverage involving experts. The second thing that Henig finds is that many of the experts are generating the content. In one in three cases, the expert is the author of a prior op-ed or letter to the editor in that same paper. And, these experts are most likely to be affiliated with a university and thus wear “the mantle of scholarly authority” (p. 193). It is not *how* journalists use experts in their coverage that is the problem, but the experts that they choose:

Use of experts relies heavily on a relatively small group of strong voices who tend to represent extremes. As a result, it is rare that the careful reader gets exposed to in-depth analysis, researchers not publicly committed to one side or the other, and competing perspectives put head to head in a way designed to discover common ground rather than portray ideological stalemate. (p. 197)

Henig concludes,

It appears the media may indirectly contribute to the polarized public face of research by shying away from stories in which experts admit shades of ambiguity and by overfeaturing articles (particularly op-eds) that use research to support a strong pro- or anti-school-choice stance. (p. 195)

Establishing the Effects of the News Media on Policy Issues

By not solely comparing the results of a content analysis with data from public opinion surveys, Henig enriches our understanding of the role of reporters and the real issues at work in media framing. However, by aligning himself with the media framing research, Henig has risked exposing his work to a methodological flaw inherent in this line of inquiry. Admittedly, the relationship between the *New York Times*' and the *Wall Street Journals*' coverage of charter school research and subsequent perceptions of this issue by researchers, political actors and funders are correlational, and certainly the participants' actions indicate that they believe them to be causal. But simultaneous occurrences and perceptions of participants are not necessarily evidence of media effects.

This is not to argue that Henig's assumptions are completely wrong. He makes correct observations about the nature and content of the newspaper coverage of charter school research. The problem is that he then proceeds to assume that this coverage has had a negative effect on research funding, the politics of charter school policy, and opinions about educational research more generally. Thus we must ask, "Did the press do the damage or was it mainly the messenger that brought the news?" (Newton, 2000, p. 214). In these cases of media coverage of politicized issues, "it is difficult to understate the methodological problems showing clear cause and effect relationships between the mass media and political outcomes"(Newton, 2000, p. 214).

This "causal" problem in establishing media effects has placed many political communications researchers in opposition to those who adopt agenda setting. Their key disagreement is less the increased politicization of news coverage, which they do not dispute, but its effects upon the public (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger & Bennett, 1999; McGuire, 1986; Newton, 2006; Norris, 2000; Zaller, 1996). McGuire (1986), for example, has chided other scholars for adhering to the "myth of massive media impact" despite substantial evidence to the contrary:

First, we are not arguing that no media effects have been found, but only that demonstrated effects are not large. A formidable proportion of the published studies (and presumably an even higher proportion of the unpublished studies) have failed to show overall effects sizable enough to reach the conventionally accepted .05 level of statistical significance. Some respectable studies...do have impacts significant at the .05 level, but even these tend to have very small effect sizes, accounting for no more than 2 or 3% of the variance in dependent variables. (p. 177)

As Pippa Norris (2000), a leading figure in this research, observes, "The fundamental flaw in the accounts of the media malaise concerns not the claims about developments in the news industry and political campaigns and their impact on the content of the political coverage, but rather the assumptions about the audience" (p. 17).

The political communications researchers identify three reasons why the link between media coverage and negative policy opinions may not be so straightforward. First, selection effects: media consumers with existing attitudes about educational research, and charter school research specifically, may be predisposed to this type of politicized coverage anyway. Thus the direction of causation would be one-way: from prior attitudes to consumption of the news media. A second reason would involve media effects where the direction of causality would run from prior news habits to subsequent political attitudes. With this explanation, the perception of charter school research and educational research coverage is limited to those who regularly read the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, etc. Henig acknowledges this possibility when he states, "If [the] primary target had been so-called Middle America, other media outlets would have been less expensive and more targeted. The advertisement in the *Times* was meant more for the eyes of Washington-based policy makers and other media elites" (p. 184). Finally, political communications scholars identify the possibility of a two-way interactive process whereby the news media only serve to further activate the already active. Thus, the coverage of charter schools research will only further entrench those who have already been engaged with the issue.

Conversely, Norris (2000) has demonstrated how the news media "have far less power to reinforce the disengagement of the disengaged" (p. 19). Given the multiplicity of alternative news sources available, when presented with news that creates "cognitive dissonance," people are more likely to find other sources, turn away, or dismiss the sources of information. She concludes, "It is not possible for us, any more than for others, to resolve the direction of causality from cross-sectional polls of public opinion taken at one point in time" (p. 18). Likewise, it is not possible for us to assert that the politicization of educational research in the news

media has any impact on public opinion, the opinion of funders, or the opinion of other policy actors based only upon conducting a case study of events.

While Henig has not aligned himself with the political communications researchers, his study has significant implications for them. The political communications scholars successfully argue that the relationship between news coverage and news effects is not straightforward. However, few researchers have investigated how structural, individual, and contextual elements mediate the impacts on policy decision making. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) "filter hypothesis" maintains that personal characteristics mediate the influence of mass communication on individuals, reinforcing or blocking the impact of media information, depending on the evaluative implications of that information and the political composition of individual discussant networks. Schmitt-Beck (2003) and Newton (2006) in separate studies have shown that news media are a comparatively weak force whose effects can be deflected, diluted and diffused by stronger forces. These stronger forces include political values associated with class, religion, age, gender and education, as well as social networks and discussions, distrust of the mass media, and personal knowledge and experience. "Equally, the variables that mediate the media may also magnify its effects so that what appears to be a large media effect is, in fact, the result of an interaction between the media and other forces" (Newton, 2006, p. 209).

Henig's research provides three other examples of direct mediators beyond the personal. First, Henig shows that national media may be mediated through local media. As one of his interviewees commented, "We know from a lot of our work that even really informed people are reading the *Bethesda Gazette* before the *Washington Post* to get community news" (p. 183). Henig concludes from this that "even when they do read about reports, members of the public may weigh other sources, including what they hear from friends and neighbors, more than they do national studies based on national data" (p. 183). Second, Henig illustrates how traditional media can be mediated (and perhaps even enhanced) by "new media." He points out:

In the era of the Internet, old studies and old articles do not fade away; they remain on the Web poised to come up whenever a student, researcher, reporter or government staffer conducts a Google search on the topic of charter schools. (p. 183)

And finally, Henig demonstrates that the timing of coverage is important to understanding media effects. As Henig explains, his interviewees "took great pains to emphasize that in real world politics short-term shifts in belief and behavior have the potential to bring about policy changes that have genuine staying power" (p.184). Because the *New York Times* article about the AFT study appeared less than three months before a congressional election, "it was reasonable to worry that some politicians out on the stump might reshape their stance on the issue if they sensed a turn in the evidence or in public support" (p. 184).

In addition to elements that mediate news coverage of research more directly, Henig identifies indirect mediators as well. These indirect mediators include the types of funding provided to researchers who end up with coverage, the institutional affiliations of the researchers, the political ideologies of such researchers, how the research is packaged for publication, and the organizational constraints of newspapers. Thus, even though Henig does not align himself with the political communications scholars, his study helps illustrate their claim about the messy nature of the media-to-policy causal chain and in so doing he identifies additional structural and contextual mediators, beyond the already recognized individual/agential elements, which impact these effects.

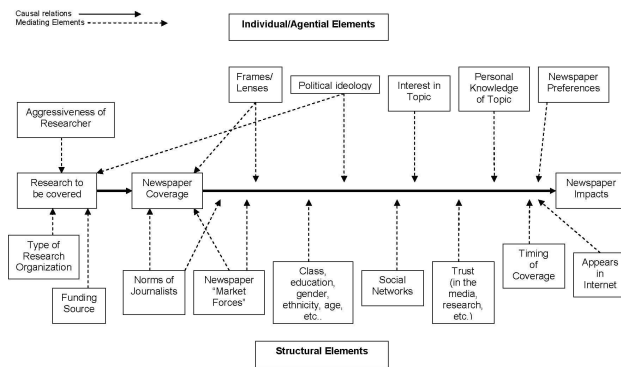
Beyond Media Framing and Political Communications

Can we conclude, based on Henig's work, that the news media do affect education policy? Despite the conflicting evidence he presents, Henig concludes that, "For most citizens, key information must come filtered through intermediaries. The mass media are critical" (p. 197). Given the prevailing evidence on media effects, a more realistic answer would indicate that *it depends*. While Henig may presumptively assume a causal relationship between news coverage of charter schools research and perceptions of charter schools and research, his methodological approach in *Spin Cycle* highlights important factors for establishing just such a connection. As Henig alludes, the causes of the politicization of educational research are neither wholly structural (how the media covers this research) nor entirely agential (what political actors such as journalists and policymakers do with that coverage), but somewhere in between. While he regards the relationship as tighter than some news media researchers, he illustrates the challenges of trying to examine the causal chain between news coverage and possible impact and also identifies mediating elements that are in need of further exploration.

If we consider how Henig's study both straddles and expands upon the agenda setting and political communications research, then a more complex picture of the causal mechanisms between news coverage and policy effects emerge. In order to understand the role of the media in policy effects, "It is only as more studies are accumulated - conducted in different settings, at different times, focusing on different consequences, distinguishing between different types..., using different measures and research designs - that we have begun to get a handle on the phenomenon" (p. 236) - just as Henig claims for research on charter schools. This accumulation of work on media impacts demonstrates that the relationship between coverage of news events and possible policy impacts is mediated by a myriad of elements. As Henig demonstrates, the causal chain does not begin with the coverage but with the research and researchers being covered, which have their own mediating elements. The coverage itself is then directly impacted by individual, normative, and organizational forces. Finally, whether the coverage has an impact on a public depends on any number of further elements, such as individual interest in the topic, individual newspaper preferences, social networks, trust in

the media, timing of coverage, and whether the coverage lives on on the Web (See Figure 1). Thus, we have a significant task ahead of us to establish that effects exist.

Figure 1: Establishing Effects from Newspaper Coverage of Research



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Understanding the intersection of the structural and agential elements in any educational politics scenario may be the key to explaining the political and social processes at work. Illustrating this may be the most important contribution of Henig's study. As Henig states, his "analysis goes beyond the common complaints that the media may exacerbate polarization by examining the specific mechanisms involved" (p. 179). In so doing, his research does not reside neatly within the existing bodies of work on media effects. Instead, Henig's research brings elements from multiple theories to the analysis of the coverage of charter school research, and thus, he pushes forward our thinking about the relationships between news coverage and policy impacts.

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