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COMMENTARY

News Media Feeds the Public a Meager Diet of Education Research

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A parent choosing a school needs information about schools, but she probably won't consult a peer-reviewed education journal. Neither will a citizen voting in an election, a policymaker crafting legislation or myriad other Americans who make important decisions about schools. Instead, these audiences are more likely to use news media outlets to form impressions or seek information.

What type of evidence do they find there? As a longtime education reporter who has returned to school to earn a PhD, I was interested in such questions, but found little academic research that could satisfy my curiosity. So I conducted an analysis of the research mentioned in the K–12 education coverage that ran during the first six months of 2010, in a sample of more than 700 U.S. print and online-only news media outlets. I also interviewed 33 journalists and bloggers who had written articles I analyzed. My goal was to gain a better understanding of the decision-making process that led them to select the studies they cited.

In this study, I found that the news media feeds the public a meager diet of education research. Of the 227,095 education-related articles and other items included in my sample, less than 1 percent mentioned research. Of this 1 percent, nearly half (45 percent) mentioned research produced by government agencies such as local school districts and the U.S. Department of Education. By contrast, just 16 percent mentioned university-produced research that had not necessarily undergone peer review. And only 3 percent mentioned research that had appeared in peer-reviewed academic journals.

So why were education writers avoiding such studies? Localism was one barrier. Most interviewees worked for outlets with a specific geographic focus. As a result, they hesitated to cover anything without an explicit local connection, which helped explain the popularity of research produced by local government.

Time too, was an obstacle. In a shrinking news industry reeling from the Recession, journalists did not necessarily have the time to sift through peer-reviewed journals until they found a study that met their needs.

And peer-reviewed research often took a long time to read because interviewees found it difficult to understand. An even more fundamental problem was that more than a quarter of the interviewees were not familiar with the definition of "peer review." This was likely related to the fact that, while all were college graduates, most (80 percent) had majored in journalism or the humanities and had a limited understanding of the methodologies or vocabularies associated with social science research.

Given that such backgrounds are typical of U.S. journalists, why, then, would science writers prefer peer-reviewed studies? One reason may be that multiple universities offer science journalism programs that aim to produce research-literate graduates. However I know of no comparable program for education journalists.

Other possible reasons are related to differences between academic fields. Education research tends to be less conclusive and more context-driven than the physical or life sciences. Yet news values stress the need to write with simplicity, clarity, and authority. Education research also attracts less funding, which limits the resources available for formal public relations and engagement efforts. As a result, individual education researchers are often left to publicize their own work. Or not. Academic incentive structures rarely reward such behavior.

Peer-reviewed education research is far from perfect: It is easy to find examples of poorly-conceived peer-reviewed studies and rigorous research that has never appeared in a peer-refereed journal. However, peer review is one method of quality control. Policymakers and members of the public who rely on the news media for information about education should, at the very least, be aware that, on the rare occasion that they do encounter research-based evidence in the print news media, it is not necessarily the most rigorous or important work that the field has to offer.

The full study is in Holly Yettick, "One Small Droplet: News Media Coverage of Peer-Reviewed and University-Based Education Research and Academic Expertise," Educational Researcher, April 2015, vol. 44 no. 3, 173-184

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