

## **Going to School Doesn't Qualify: The Uses of Education Experts in Mass Media Reporting through the lens of the DeVos hearings**

Ali Carr-Chellman, Ph.D.

Dean, College of Education, Health & Human Sciences & Professor of Curriculum & Instruction

College of Education, Health and Human Sciences

University of Idaho

875 Perimeter Drive MS 3080

Moscow, ID 83844-3080

[alicarrchellman@uidaho.edu](mailto:alicarrchellman@uidaho.edu)

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#### **Abstract**

This study examines the uses of education experts in mass media broadcast outlets through content analysis to determine the reliance on pundits, political correspondents and educational experts. Utilizing Wimmer & Dominick's content analysis procedure, an examination of reporting related to DeVos' confirmation across media outlets were analyzed and quantified. The study finds a significant lack of reliance on educational experts, teachers, professors, scholars, or others who have spent time studying education. Instead, most of the reporting relied on correspondents, pundits, a few video sources from the hearings, and precious few educational experts. This study explores the few experts that were consulted, what is lost when experts are left out of the equation and the extent to which this tendency is more marked because of the educational context.

**Keywords:** Media, Expertise, DeVos, Content Analysis

#### **Introduction**

As an educational scholar, a former teacher, and someone who has spent more than 20 years thinking about how to improve schools, the nomination of Betsy DeVos as the Trump administration's secretary of Education was of high interest to me. As I "tuned in" and listened carefully to reports across the media spectrum from a variety of mass media sources, the reporting was remarkable; it was highly politicized, with very little education content infused into the dialogue. A parade of non-educators moved in and out of the discussion reflecting on various political educational initiatives with very little depth of understanding or research foundation. A question arose about whether those who had spent substantial time in classrooms or studying classrooms had been consulted at all for these reports. The discussion seemed purely

political with little or no “science” of education being considered. This suspicion, as is so often the case, turned into hypotheses related to the coverage and soon it became related to the kind of rhetoric that represents the Trump administration across media outlets. Less reliance on expertise and intellectuals seemed obvious in this administration, a given.

Thus the notion that there wasn’t sufficient reliance on expertise was unfamiliar territory. Nevertheless, the problem of understanding both what level of expertise was being engaged as well as what impact that may have on the general social understanding of education became a point of significant interest. Among the general populace, many seem to believe that by having attended schools, they are qualified to judge and prescribe solutions for the ills of schools. It is as if we were to say, “Hey I’ve eaten in restaurants my whole life I can surely run a restaurant.” This is not a reasonable conclusion, of course, and most of us would realize this, but because we’ve been both student and often parents in schools, and thus have had significant “outsider” experience in schools, we come to a place of believing that the scholarship of education is essentially either unnecessary or, at least, unrelated to the current dialogues on school issues. Based on this foundation, the study at hand takes up a basic media content analysis to examine, in a descriptive way, the use of experts related to the DeVos hearings across recognized mass media outlets to advance an understanding of the uses of experts in education reporting.

### **Literature Foundations**

While there has been some work done in media studies related to the role that the media plays in setting the agenda of political rhetoric and coverage (Vargo & Guo, 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1993) little scholarship exists related to the coverage of educational issues (Coe & Kuttner, 2018; West, Whitehurst & Dionne, 2009; Opfer, 2007). In fact, Coe & Kuttner place the start of educational mass media reportage studies about 10 years ago, so this is truly a relatively new area. Coe & Kuttner call for research not just into what topics are covered, but also who is consulted and who speaks for educational issues. The way that media helps to control the messaging and understandings of the news is central to this discussion as we unpack part of the method used by the media to control the message. The use of experts in media reporting is essentially an area of significant control and messaging. Where experts with strong academic credentials are utilized, we typically see more scientific validity offered to the specific messaging. In the classic *Deciding What’s News* (1979), Gans lays out a strong sense of news coverage and sources broadly. Where expertise is concerned, he eschews the role of experts as beyond the understanding of the masses,

The notion that journalists are employing the wrong methods is at the heart of most complaints, by social scientists and others, that the news is too superficial and overly addicted to dramatic action...Charges that the news is superficial or overly dramatic often reflect the implicit standards of experts—and well-educated lay people—who are, in effect, arguing that the news fails to supply the detailed technical description and the explanatory-predictive information to which they are accustomed. In some cases they may also be criticizing the news for its failure to supply them with the information they want or need as experts. ...expert

concepts and technical vocabularies cannot be understood by people without the requisite education... (307-8).

As McCombs & Shaw point out, "New research exploring the consequences of agenda setting and media framing suggest that the media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think." (65). Unless we expect the least of mass media news audiences today, the employ of experts is a necessary and important topic worthy of further consideration. This paper explores the connection between experts in education and learning specifically for the understanding of general education and policy debates in mass media.

To be more specific, there have been a fair number of existing reports on Betsy DeVos' record as an educator and reformer, however there are relatively few formal academic reports on DeVos prior to her hearings. McShane (2017), an American Enterprise member, reviews Ms. DeVos' record noting that she has been painted as a "privatization extremist", a "religious zealot" and a "culture warrior." However, he asserts that her real record speaks to a relatively right-wing reformer with a history of accountability and two decades of school choice policy advocacy. McShane points out the criticisms from both right and left and a large number of unanswered questions given her lack of experience running such a large organization as the U.S. Department of Education. Pagano (2018) a member of the American Council on Education, positions the concerns around DeVos as a necessary defense of public schooling. Framing DeVos as the impetus for privatization across the U.S, Pagano expresses deep concern for issues of equity across privatized options. Hartle (2017) points to significant concerns over the potential changes to the Title IX guidelines that DeVos proposed nearly a year ago. Suggesting caution and a measured response, Hartle asserts that this move by the Department of Education under DeVos' leadership has good potential for increasing clarity and potential transparency. Courtney (2017) brings significant levels of research into the debate around school vouchers and their impact on improving student achievement.

Media reports on the DeVos hearings are at the center of our interests here, but we have focused on the mass broadcast media not print. As such including some of the media reports here is a beginning to a complete exploration of the use of experts in mass media coverage of the DeVos' hearings. Of particular interest is a report in *The 74* by Phenicle (2017) in which 24 education leaders are consulted on what they would ask during the hearings. While the questions are of interest, what is more interesting, for the purposes of this work, are the selection of the 24 educational leaders. Among them, the predominance of advocates from reform institutes with a particular political position is remarkable. With only one teacher, two superintendents, and two faculty/university experts being consulted out of the 24, the dominance of political rhetoric is clear. Of course, *The 74* is a publication that is partially funded by DeVos' foundation with the following published caveat "The Dick & Betsy DeVos Family Foundation provided funding to *The 74* from 2014-2016."

Similarly, Swaak (2018) looks to "education experts" to review DeVos' first year but includes only two faculty, no teachers, principals, or superintendents, and focuses primarily on political or union groups. Jackson (2017) examines responses to DeVos' nomination among education experts relying heavily on one Harvard lecturer, and

one NYU professor. In general, the literature both mass media and academic studies show a tendency toward rhetorical argumentation for political effect rather than a reliance on experts with training or experience in classrooms.

## **Method**

In understanding the impact of experts in the media reports on DeVos' hearing and confirmation, the approach was informed by the basics of *Mass Media Research* (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). With a specific focus on content analysis (Macnamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2010), this study takes up the process of "studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables." (p. 112). However, it is important to recognize, as Wimmer & Dominick point out, that this is within the space of a particular context. That is, the inferences are not just looking at the content independent of the larger, in this case, political space in which the communications take place. In this method, as reflected in this study, all data are examined under consistent rules, treated in the same manner as independent of researcher's biases as is possible. As such, the data are quantified and succinctly reported with an openness to understanding the potential effects of the communication content. There are a variety of ways that content analysis can be utilized many of which tend toward examining messaging over time. This study looks at a small slice of time and one particular issue in order to sample the impact of education experts on mass media dialogues about schooling and education in America. In this way, it is more of a hypothesis testing study than a pure description over time. As Wimmer & Dominick point out, it is important not to rely solely on content analysis to understand media effects.

This study follows Wimmer & Dominick's 10 steps in conducting a content analysis (p. 116):

1. Formulate questions and hypotheses: see below.
2. Define the population in question: in this case the population is not a human population but rather a set of media outlets. Included in this study was mass media television coverage from ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.
3. Select an appropriate sample from the population: here we have limited the sample to dates that represent one week on either side of the confirmation of Betsy DeVos.
4. Select and define a unit of analysis: in this study, a unit of analysis was a transcript for any of these mass media outlets during the time frame in which DeVos was mentioned.
5. Construct the categories of content to be analyzed: an Excel spreadsheet was set up for data collection and included the following categories: date, source, show, number of expert instances (thus each instance an expert spoke was counted separately within any one transcript), expert name, expert credentials, and notes on experts consulted
6. Establish a quantification system: This represented a fairly simple counting system for each instance an expert spoke on any of these mass media news shows.
7. Train coders and conduct a pilot study: an initial examination of the process and method was tested with the same population but a different time space to ensure that process itself would be a workable solution

8. Code the content according to established definitions; coding took place over a period of 6 months and followed the established protocol.
9. Analyze the collected data: data was examined after coding was complete to determine prevalence of education experts on the DeVos story.
10. Draw conclusions and search for indications: this paper represents the results of this consideration and discussion.

This study examined the uses of experts in mass media stories reporting on the confirmation hearings of Betsy DeVos. The hearings were selected as the news event of interest primarily because the confirmation is a high-profile opportunity to connect education experts to the mass media coverage of an education specific issue. Surrounding issues such as school choice, policy making, and educational expertise are all interwoven in this particular story. As such, it is a clear space where we might expect to hear from education specialists and experts. In comparison, for example, should we have looked instead at school shootings, while this is clearly an education issue, it would also involve gun control, mental health specialists, community involvement, video gaming/media effects, so there would be an expectation of several other kinds of experts who might weigh in on such a story. The DeVos hearings are more “purely” education than the example of school shootings, and as such we would be more likely to see education experts consulted if any experts are consulted at all.

This research direction has led to the following hypotheses and research questions:

- H1) Few educational experts were consulted throughout the DeVos confirmation
- RQ1) How many educational experts were included in transcripts during the confirmation time period across major media outlets.
- H2) Experts that are consulted throughout the DeVos confirmation will be other than educationally oriented
- RQ2) What were the specific qualifications for those who were part of the DeVos confirmation coverage?
- H3) Among educational experts, few will have advanced educational qualifications
- RQ3) What were the specific educational qualifications for those who were considered educational experts?

In selecting the media outlets to be analyzed, this study looked at the most common mass media outlets including CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, MSNBC, and Fox News. Lexis Nexis database was searched for one week prior to and one week after the confirmation of Betsy DeVos for all transcripts. 290 transcripts were identified during the designated time period as having some mention of DeVos among the specified media outlets. Each of these transcripts was then analyzed to identify any experts interviewed. Experts included senators, correspondents, contributors. These were tracked, although they were not the primary interest of this research. Rather, the focus on *educational* experts was the primary interest. Educational experts started as faculty from universities and colleges of education with an education focus (not professors of media or political science). However, as the data analysis began it was clear that there were other education experts that should be included such as National Education Association (union) representatives, or charter school advocates even though these individuals were not faculty in education or those who specifically study education from a research perspective.

## Results

This examination of the DeVos confirmation was focused on a time range of one week prior and one week after the confirmation of Secretary DeVos. that is February 1-14, 2017 (the actual confirmation was February 7, 2017). This method is similar to Parks' 2017 work on *Silent Spring* in which the ways the media influence can narrow overall understanding of a piece of writing utilized a similar method, in that the author identified a specific date range and specific media outlets. In this study, using Lexis Nexus as a search engine with the specific date range and mass media transcripts for the following major media outlets, *ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News, MSNBC and CNN* across all content types. To establish the complete scope of discussions related to the DeVos confirmation, searches for the name DeVos during the time period across transcripts from all six news outlets were examined in depth. Each transcript was read in its entirety to search for any "experts" that were included in the transcript related to the DeVos discussion.

Across all six outlets for the two-week period, the Lexis Nexus search returned 290 results, however, only 261 were considered because 29 had a mention of the DeVos name, but not substantive discussion of the hearings or of her as a nominee. NBC returned 13 results, MSNBC returned 42 results, Fox News returned 20 results, CNN returned 152 results, CBS returned 21 results and ABC returned 13 results.

All results from transcripts were keyed into an Excel spreadsheet for categorizing and notation. Items were identified based on date, outlet source (e.g., CNN, ABC, NBC, Fox News etc.), the name of the specific show, the number of times an expert spoke (if at all), the name of the expert, the credentials of the expert and any additional notes. Thus, each entry for any of these six outlets who mentioned DeVos in any show during the two-week time period in February 2017 included 7 distinct fields that were entered for each record.

Experts were defined as any education related expert, thus senators, governors, correspondents, writers and political pundits were not considered "education experts." This is not to suggest that they are not experts in their own right, or that they did not have important information to add to the dialogue on DeVos, but rather that they were not necessarily informed on current research, findings, scholarship, or practice in schools. Notes included information on others who were interviewed (thus senators, governors, correspondents, writers and pundits were mentioned in notes) as well as any mentions of educators, descriptions of the segment such as "included a video clip" or "brief mention".

Across the 261 transcripts, more than a thousand "talkers" who were not the host of the show were included in the discussions and reporting on DeVos' confirmation hearings. Among these there was a clear dominance of pundits and correspondents. The dialogue understandably focused on the political angles on the hearings rather than more fundamental educational issues, however, much of the reportage did include significant discussion of educational questions such as privatization, charters, schools of choice, student achievement/progress and other topics that would be informed by educational experts. However, of the more than 1000 "talkers" there were only nine experts consulted by these major news outlets. Across these nine experts, 29 comments were made. These nine experts included five representatives of teachers' unions (National Education Association and American Federation of

Teachers), one former superintendent, one former secretary of education, one CEO of an educational reform non-profit, and one professor of education. I found this completely remarkable, that so few of the “talkers” were people who had spent substantial amounts of their professional lives in classrooms or studying classrooms.

## **Discussion**

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were confirmed from this data. Few experts were consulted, and most of the experts were not education experts, but rather they fell into pundit or politician categories. Hypothesis 3 was difficult to ascertain as there were statistically so few educational experts that understanding their credentials seemed fairly inconsequential. Overall, more than half of the educational experts did have “advanced degrees,” defined as masters or doctoral degree. However, the education make-up of our education experts is rather interesting. The most common undergraduate degree for this group is political science or government. Several have no education degrees and there are several law degrees that we count as advanced degrees though they do not represent advanced training in educational scholarship. Naturally, the one professor does have extensive training in the education discipline and is the only consulted expert that holds a doctorate.

This research doesn’t examine the depth of the content discussed by these experts, or really the overall sense of how expertise, pundits, correspondents and hosts utilize their time in discussion of educational issues. This would be fodder for future studies. And there are some obvious limitations to this work, looking only at this one slice of educational discourse, over a short period of time, and in particular not looking at print media outlets, only the broadcast media, made the project feasible, but incomplete. As such, this study stands as an early harbinger of concerns related to the extent to which we take the scholarship in education seriously and as important inputs into debates and discussions for the general public. It is important for all of us who are scholars in education to consider ways in which we can bring the ideas that we study into the public discourse more practically. This outcome is surprising. I frankly believed that there was an anti-intellectual tendency in the media coverage, but never imagined the extent to which this would actually live itself out in the media reporting. Indeed, the dearth of informed, educated, experienced educators being consulted on a critical education issue is remarkable as shown in this study. While a more complete picture is needed by looking at other time frames, other educational issues, and other angles on this issue, this is an important and useful start. Very few of the scholars who have spent their lives toiling in relative obscurity have brought their life’s work to bear on the mass media reporting of educational issues, based on this study. Hopefully, as this field continues to grow, we will have not only opportunities to understand media coverage of education expert voices, but also to impact that coverage directly with public scholarship.

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