



Citation Cartels, Dismissive Literature Reviews, and Big Money Dominate US Education Policy*

Richard P. Phelps†

Abstract

US education policy research is dominated by copiously funded ‘strategic authors’ who utilize methods that showcase their work and suppress the work of others. Dismissive literature reviews declare that previous research is either nonexistent or no good and is not referenced. Citation cartels reference the research conducted among cartel members and ignore that conducted by others. Education journalists, the federal government, and wealthy foundations support this effort in information reduction. Adoption of the Common Core Standards serves as a case study of information narrowing on a grand scale.

Keyphrases

Education policy, standardized testing, dismissive review, citation cartel, censorship.

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Introduction

Some of you may work in the hard sciences. I work in the soft social sciences and, some would argue, education is the softest of them all—article retractions are rare; deliberately misleading research claims are

common; censorship is rife. Much US education research simply should not be trusted, especially that produced by some of its most celebrated scholars. Some say that the biggest problem with our current politics is the winner-take-all electoral system and the winner-take-all mentality it supports. Politicians want to win, rather than lead. Much the same problem afflicts US education research. Many researchers want to win, rather than cooperate in growing our base of knowledge.

Dismissive Literature Reviews

I start with *dismissive literature reviews* (Phelps 2021). At the beginning of a research article a scholar is expected to summarize the pre-existing research. Many researchers take the easy way out. A key aspect is the dismissed research and researchers are not identified — so there’s no debate and the public is given no information for finding the other research. There exist three general types: simple dismissals, firstness claims, and denigrations. You can see for yourself how common these are by entering some common dismissive phrases into an internet search engine, such as: “there is very little research on ...,” “this is the first study to ...,” or “earlier studies had major deficiencies.” The benefits to the dismitter include: saves lots of time doing unrewarded literature searches and reviews; adds to one’s own citation totals, or those of one’s cooperating colleagues, while not adding to rivals’ totals; gains attention by allegedly being *first*, *original*, or a *pioneer*; increases the likelihood of press coverage and grant funding or the same reason. Meanwhile, the costs of dismissive reviews accrue to society: society loses information; remaining information is skewed in favor of the powerful; policy decisions are based on information that is limited and skewed; government and foundations may pay again for research that has already been done (Eagles 2012; Phelps 2016a; Weinstein 2018; Phelps 2024b; Phelps 2024a).

Citation Cartels

A *citation cartel* is a group of researchers who frequently cite each other and ignore or dismiss work from outside their group (Brewer 1979; Brewer 1999; Bai et al. 2022). Here’s a simple model of the advantage. Assume twenty researchers with ten publications a year, each with ten citations. Ten *strategic* scholars cite only each other’s work. Ten *sincere* scholars cite everyone’s work. The result: Strategic scholars triple sincere scholars’ citation numbers (Phelps 2022). See Figure 1. Citation numbers are prominently considered in many hiring, promo-

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†Correspondence to richard@nonpartisaneducation.org.

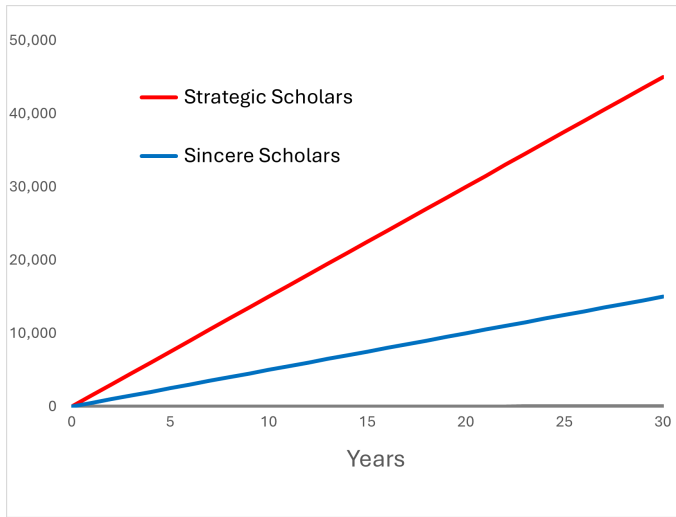


Figure 1: Comparing Strategic and Sincere Scholarship: Citation accumulation over time.

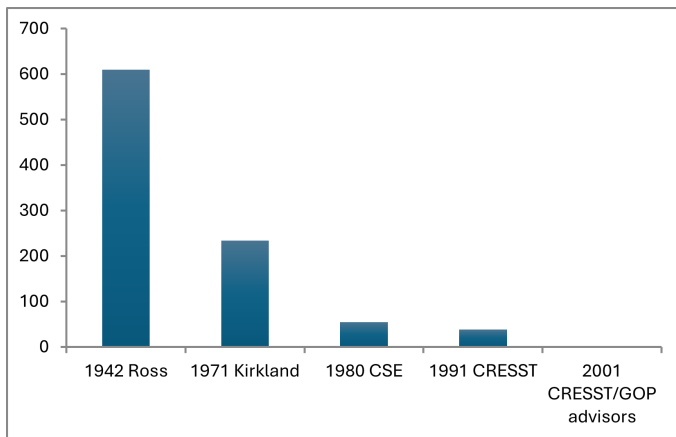


Figure 2: Disappearing research on testing in schools.

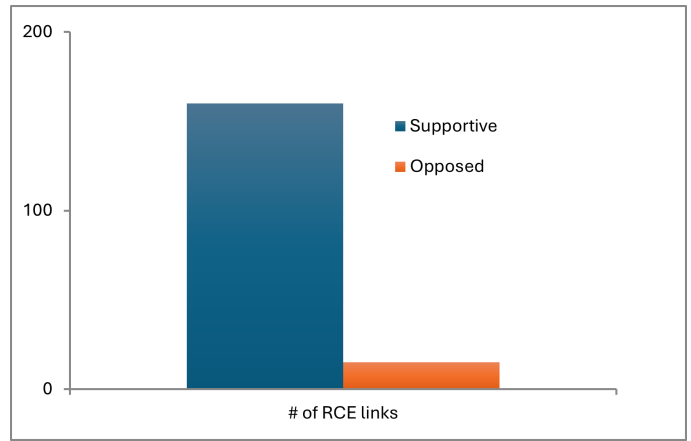


Figure 3: Number of links to articles supportive or opposed to Common Core Initiative.

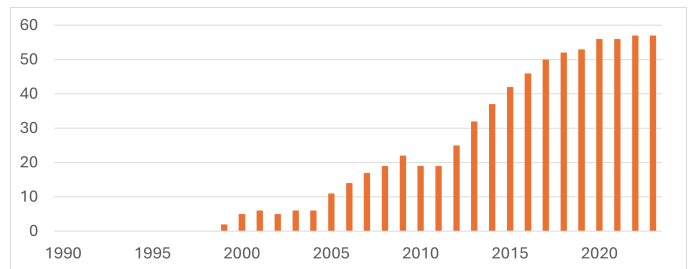


Figure 4: Number of US education journalists working in organizations largely subsidized by the Gates and Walton Foundations, 1990 to 2023 (out of 72 total).

one hour. He then recruited all the opinion leaders he could buy, which was just about all of those who mattered in education policy. The federal government under both Presidents Bush and Obama then joined the Gates Foundation and its allies. The standards themselves were written in secret by private entities. After an extraordinarily one-sided propaganda campaign 45 states adopted the Common Core Standards, sight unseen. Measured in dollars alone, Standards proponents vastly outspent opponents. \$16 billion came from the federal government and at least another \$330 million from the Gates and allied foundations. Opponents raised less than \$100 thousand (Wood 2015). Figure 3 shows my accounting of a couple of years' worth of coverage of the Common Core Standards in just one online education publication, *Real Clear Education* (Phelps 2018).

I compared the number of mentions and links to sources openly advocating in favor or against. *In favor* wins by several hundred mentions. In this case, the editor at the time also headed an organization receiving many millions from the Gates and allied foundations. Bias may explain some of journalists' favoritism. But there seem to be structural professional issues as well (Yettick 2011; Phelps 2016b). The Appendix lists some of the topics on which journalists at just two organizations presented a certain think tank president (Mr. X) as an expert source. Not expecting you to dwell on the details.

I will summarize for you: First, the topics spread all over the education domain: K-12, higher ed, school choice, finance, gifted education, tracking, scholarship programs, medications for students, testing, and on and on. Second, this think tank president has specific training or work experience in no more than a couple of these topics. So, how

tion, and award decisions. The scientific study of educational standards and standardized testing dates to the 1890s. By 1942, a popular textbook on the topic contained citations to hundreds of sources (Ross 1941). Around 1980 and for a few decades after, the US government funded a single research center on the topic and awarded it millions in funds. The research center peppered its taxpayer-funded publications and conference presentations with hundreds—probably over a thousand—dismissive literature reviews, denying the existence of others' work on the topic (Phelps 2020). Then, in 2001, when the US government chose to design a new national testing program, politicians were told there was no research to help guide them. With that, the acknowledged quantity of a century's worth of research on educational testing declined to zero. See Figure 2. Believing there was no relevant research on testing program design or testing effects, in 2002 the federal administration and US Congress chose to adapt the oddly idiosyncratic Texas testing program of newly elected President George W. Bush.

The Common Core Standards

The billionaire Bill Gates decided to push the country to adopt national content standards after meeting with two individual partisans for

did he become the most frequently sourced expert across several national publications? Largely convenience. His Gates-funded think tank markets full time for media coverage. Next, I studied the resumes and LinkedIn profiles of 72 US education journalists (Dunning 2011; Hills 2018; Phelps 2023a). See Figure 4.

One overarching trend dominates the results: a migration en masse from traditional independent news outlets to education-only publications heavily subsidized by the Gates and allied foundations. 10 out of the total 72 journalists now work at a particular online education newspaper — *The 74* — that is heavily subsidized by Common Core promoters. It writes stories based in pro Common Core beliefs and propaganda. It chooses stories based on Common Core proponents' concerns. It is 'pack funded' — one or two leading foundations go one way and then dozens of others follow. Other journalists now work for Gates-funded think tanks and advocacy groups (Janis and Mann 1977; Hart 1991; Rai 2022).

Here is one of the most famous quotes about information dissemination, attributed apparently falsely, to Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels (Wikiquote 2025): "If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it, and you will even come to believe it yourself." Regardless of who coined the phrase, psychologists' experiments have affirmed the quotation's validity. Some will resist misinformation when they hear it 70% of the time, fewer will resist when they hear it 80% of the time, even fewer will resist when they hear it 90% of the time, and very few will resist misinformation when they hear it 99% of the time and from 99% of the people they know (Fazio et al. 2015).

Conclusion

Judge scholars by their net contribution to society's collective working memory. We should honor and reward scholars based on their net contributions. Many scholars march to the top of their profession along a scorched earth path. They may, indeed, contribute new, useful knowledge. But they do so at the expense of ignoring, misrepresenting, and suppressing the work of other scholars (Taleb 2016). Their subtractions from society's working memory should be considered along with their additions. A scholar can only add knowledge one study at a time. With each study, however, a scholar can ignore, misrepresent, or suppress entire research literatures. When the federal government and private foundations give gobs of money to certain research groups they help disseminate certain perspectives. But, in many cases they also help to suppress other information, evidence, and opinions. Society is better served by considering all the information and evidence, not just the portion the rich and powerful prefer (Phelps 2023b).

Given that those who benefit from the current system are unlikely to work to change it, how do we nudge society to consider all the relevant information and evidence and only then judge scholars by their net contributions? We can begin by supporting the continuing efforts of the Brain Health Alliance Virtual Institute (BHAVI) to promote integrity in scholarly research communications. Start with the original collection of principles by C. Taswell (2007) from the PORTAL-DOORS Project for the Semantic Web, since renamed the DREAM Principles by Craig et al. (2019) with the acronym DREAM for the phrase "Discoverable Data with Reproducible Results for Equivalent Entities with Accessible Attributes and Manageable Metadata". Then continue with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Scholarly Research Integrity* (S. K. Taswell, Triggles, et al. 2020), *Truth in Science* (S. K. Taswell, Athreya, et al. 2021), *Epistemic Injustice, Open Access, and Citational Justice* (C. Taswell 2022), and other efforts at BHAVI to systematize knowledge retention and dissemination.

To curb abuses, we need a common vocabulary with clear incentives and procedures for correcting the mis- and dis-information clogging the scholarly record.

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Contact: richard@nonpartisaneducation.org

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Appendix

Topics on which Mr. X has been sourced as an expert in USA Today and at the Education Writers Association: Academic tracking; ADHD and stimulant medication use; Charter schools, vouchers; Civil rights debates; College student loan forgiveness; Common Core testing success or failure; Congressional sequestration, federal budget; COVID relief funds; Culture wars, school boards, CRT; Desegregation and education reform; DeVos troubles; Gifted education; Homework; How TN and DE won Race to the Top funds; Linking home and classroom in Oakland; Local educational spending disparities; Los Angeles superintendent controversy; Media coverage of Chicago teacher strike; NAEP math and reading score trends; NEA and charter schools; Out-of-School factors and opportunities; Parenting versus poverty issues; Pell Grant and Scholarship rules; Policies of NYC chancellor; Rate of change with Common Core; Rock star superintendents; School Accountability; Schools re-opening after COVID; State grading systems; State takeovers in Mississippi; Understanding opponents of Common Core; Urban middle class and diversity.