

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education



Wednesday, July 29, 2009

July 29, 2009, 09:00 AM ET

Shoddy Academic Study Denounces Media for Noncoverage of Shoddy Academic Studies

By [Kevin Carey](#)

A couple of days ago, I received an e-mail from the teachers' union-funded "Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice" touting a new [study](#) written by Holly Yetick of the University of Colorado at Boulder, allegedly uncovering rampant pro-think tank bias in the mainstream media. As the policy director of a think tank, I was naturally interested -- we're always looking for new ideas when it comes to prosecuting our nefarious media-manipulation plans. Alas, I was disappointed. In an analysis of 864 articles published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Education Week*, the author found that:

Although university and government sources were cited more often, a higher percentage of reports produced by advocacy-oriented think tanks were cited by both types of publications. Universities produce 14 to 16 times more research than think tanks, but the three publications only mentioned their studies twice as often as think tank reports. As a result, any given think tank report was substantially more likely to be cited than any given study studies [sic] produced by a university.

That's not a bad way of counting press hits, although I probably would have added the AP, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. (Note also the K-12 bias -- *Ed Week* but no *Chronicle* or *InsideHigherEd*). It's the denominator that really throws these numbers out of whack. Presumably, nearly every one of the think-tank studies in question was written with the hope of garnering some media coverage. The universe of academic studies, by contrast, was calculated in two ways: the total number of papers accepted at the 2008 meeting of AERA (8,064), and the total number of articles published in 2007 in 176 peer-reviewed journals (7,172). Now, maybe third-rate journalism is at the root of the *Washington Post's* failure to provide A1-coverage to articles like "Still jumping on the balance beam: continued use of perceptual motor programs in Australian schools," from the April 2007 edition of the *Australian Journal of Education*, one of the peer-reviewed journals in question. Ditto "Contributions and challenges to vocational psychology from other disciplines: examples from narrative and narratology," from the *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*. And maybe *Ed Week* needs to take a long, hard look at its standards and practices after failing to cover "Complicating Swedish Feminist Pedagogy" and "Complexity Theories at the Intersection of Hermeneutics and Phenomenology" from the 2008 AERA. But maybe not.

The article also alleges a conservative bias in news coverage, as evidenced by the fact that newspapers tend to cite studies from notorious right-wing outfits like ... Education Sector, where I work. Without going into the political and professional histories of our staff at length, let me assure you that this view is completely absurd. If we're on the "right" side of the spectrum and "centrist-libertarian," why is the Cato Institute always [insisting](#) I'm wrong?

What accounts for the relatively high think tank batting average? In announcing the paper, the Great Lakes center said, "Yetick indicates that this is likely due, at least in part, to the skill and resources think tanks devote to publicity for their reports, using sophisticated marketing campaigns targeting journalists, policy makers and the public for which university professors generally lack the resources and motivation to do." You hear this a lot. Well, I've worked at three of the think tanks covered in the report -- the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and The Education Trust are the other two -- so I have pretty good sense of how they operate. And I probably shouldn't be revealing the sophisticated marketing secrets that allow us to crowd out allegedly more-rigorous university-based research with our "ideologically driven" work. But what the heck. Here's my secret recipe:

- 1) Before a report is released, send an email to editors and reporters at publications where you'd like it to be covered. Describe the findings, briefly, and explain why it might make a good story.
- 2) Give them a copy of the report, for free.
- 3) Include your email address and phone number, in case they have any questions. Check your messages. If they e-mail or call back and say "I'm on deadline for five o'clock," respond before five o'clock.
- 4) Be succinct. Don't, for example, write "It is, in fact, true that advocacy-oriented think tanks rarely have their research peer reviewed and repeatedly have been found to engage in research practices that cast suspicion on the validity of the findings" if something is, in fact, true, then it's true. Moreover, as a reader, my assumption is that you're not deliberately lying to me. If you say it, I assume you believe it's true. So the sentence should begin "Advocacy-oriented think tanks ..." and go from there. These things matter! See Strunk and White for further advice.

Also, proofread. "study studies"?

In the end I think the marketplace of ideas is a quite a bit more efficient than Yetick believes. Reporters aren't all idiots and think tanks don't succeed through P.R. witchcraft. If the media isn't covering your research, it's probably not my fault.

Copyright 2009. All Rights reserved

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037