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Think tanks, education and elite policy actors

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Abstract

The past decade has seen think tanks operate in sophisticated ways to influence the development of education policies. In this paper, I reflect upon the influence of think tanks in the formation of national reform, using the Common Core State Standards initiative in the USA as an illustrative case. In doing so, I explore how certain think tanks, headed by political elites and backed by significant philanthropic funding, have sought to influence the reform initiative. My central argument is that meanings and practices associated with political publics are being transformed as elite policy actors gain influence. Through mobilising significant political and economic power, elites work through think tanks to influence policy debates, re-frame policy problems and advocate for particular policy solutions. The new public formations that are resulting appear to be shifting the conditions of possibility for policy making in education.

Think tanks, education policy; political elite; publics; Common Core State Standards; curriculum; philanthropy

Introduction

The past decade has seen think tanks operate in sophisticated ways to influence the development of education policies. In the USA, think tanks have played a central role in the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which is purportedly a *state-led* initiative, but has been driven to a large extent by *non-government* policy actors and organisations (Rothman 2011; McDonnell & Weatherford 2013; Savage & O'Connor 2015). The most powerful think tanks in the CCSS development process have been headed by political elites[1] and backed by significant philanthropic funding. These think tanks have worked strategically to influence the inception, development and implementation of the CCSS by producing pro-CCSS materials, building political support for the reform, and seeking to influence public debates.

In this paper, I use the CCSS as an illustrative case to reflect upon the influence of think tanks in the formation of national education reforms. In doing so, I explore the consequences of growing think tank influence for the making of national political publics, with a specific focus on the role of political and economic elites in policy development processes. I begin by

laying some theoretical foundations concerning think tanks, drawing in particular upon the work of Medvetz (2008; 2012a; 2012b), who advances a relational conceptualisation of think tanks as *boundary organisations* that inhabit unique and intersecting positions between the fields of academia, politics, the market, and the media. I then canvas theories associated with the formation of publics and suggest that the unique positioning of think tanks means these organisations can contribute to the making of political publics and policies in ways that other organisations cannot. Having established some theoretical foundations, I then explore think tank involvement in the development of the CCSS, looking in particular at the activities of three think tanks that are each headed by political elites and which have all received significant financial backing by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation: the Hunt Institute; the Alliance for Excellent Education; and the Foundation for Excellence in Education. I conclude with a discussion of what emerging trends mean for the constitution of political publics. My central argument is that meanings and practices associated with political publics are being transformed as elite policy actors gain influence. Through mobilising significant political and economic power, elites *work through* think tanks to influence policy debates, re-frame policy problems and advocate for particular policy solutions. The new public formations that are resulting appear to be shifting the conditions of possibility for policy making in education.

Conceptualizing think tanks

Despite the increased presence of think tanks in the world of policy making, there remains a lack of research that has analysed the roles and powers of these unique organisations (Rich 2004; Medvetz 2012a). Historically, research into think tanks has been concentrated in the USA where there has traditionally been a strong role for think tanks in civil society, yet the field remains underdeveloped (Medvetz 2012a). In terms of education policy, very little research into think tanks has been conducted. In recent years, the role of non-government organisations in shaping American education policy has started to receive greater attention (e.g. Picciano & Spring 2013; McDonnell & Weatherford 2013; Savage & O'Connor 2015), however, think tanks have received less attention in comparison to philanthropic organisations (e.g. Reckhow 2013; Lipman 2014). Ball and Junemann's (2012) work into new forms of network governance in the UK also foregrounds philanthropy and businesses over thinks tanks.

One of the main challenges in doing think tank research is defining the object of study: that is, defining what a think tank *is or is not* for the purpose of analysis. For the purposes of this paper, I engage conceptually with the work of Medvetz (2008; 2012a; 2012b), whose analysis of think tanks in America provides a detailed historical account of how American think tanks have developed and also attempts to move beyond established theoretical framings to forge a new conceptualisation of the phenomenon. Medvetz (2012a) argues that there have historically been three main perspectives in academic literature that have sought to understand think tanks. The first is derived from the *elite theory perspective*, which stems from the work of C.

Wright Mills and 'depicts think tanks as the intellectual machinery of a closed network of corporate, financial, and political elites' (p. 8). This perspective suggests that think tanks 'should be analyzed not as neutral centers of research and analysis, but instead as instruments deployed strategically in the service of a ruling class political agenda' (p. 8). Second is the *pluralist perspective*, which views 'public policy making as the product of a dynamic interplay among organized interest groups, each with its own resources, strategies, and goals' (p. 8), and which understands think tanks 'not as weapons of ruling class power, but as one kind of organization among many in a wide array of societal groups that compete to shape public policy' (pp. 8-9). Third is the *institutional perspective*, which he describes in terms of a 'family of approaches' that 'focus on the structural environments in which think tanks are embedded, the rules and norms that shape their behavior, and the organizational arrangements and processes to which they must respond (pp. 12-13). Medvetz argues that elite and pluralist perspectives remain the major reference points for understanding think tanks in contemporary theory and research (see also Stone 1991, pp. 197-200).

According to Medvetz, each of the three perspectives suffers from shortcomings and fails to capture the contemporary machinations of think tanks. Medvetz argues that all three perspectives are based on an arbitrary and misleading assumption that think tanks retain *independence* from the fields of academic, political, economic and media production. Indeed, claims that independence is a defining feature of think tanks are well established in think tank literature (e.g. Stone 1991; McGann & Weaver 2002; Rich 2004). Medvetz (2012a) turns this assumption on its head by suggesting think tanks gain distinctiveness *not* from independence from such institutions, but from the ability to inhabit a space that simultaneously cuts into *and* retains distance from each of the four 'parent fields' of academia, politics, the market, and the media (p. 18). Think tanks are defined, therefore, by a simultaneous *dependence on* and *opposition to* these parent fields. Drawing upon Bourdieu, Medvetz (2012a) argues that think tanks 'gather a complex mixture of institutionalized resources', or 'forms of *capital*' from these parent fields, but must also 'avoid the appearance of complete dependence' on either (p. 24, *italics in original*). In other words, think tanks rely upon these parent fields to gain credibility and power, but must avoid being subsumed into either field in order to retain their distinctiveness and *veneer* of independence:

> The think tank is thus caught in an endless and self-contradictory cycle of detachment and association. It can never fully separate itself from its parent institutions because each association supplies a form of authority that makes its putative separation from the other institutions appear plausible. But neither can the think tank simply *become* a university, an advocacy group, a business, or a media organ, because to do so would be to cease to exist as a think tank (Medvetz 2008, pp. 6-7).

Medvetz (2012a) frames think tanks 'not as a discrete class of organizations per se, but as a fuzzy network of organizations, themselves divided by the opposing logics of academic, political, economic, and media production' (p. 16). Think tanks inhabit, he argues, 'a space between fields', and are thus 'members of an interstitial field … a semi-structured network of

organizations that traverses, links, and overlaps the more established spheres of academic, political, business, and media production' (p. 25).

Based on this, Medvetz advances 'a relational conceptualization' of think tanks (2012a, p. 33), framing them as 'boundary organizations' (2012b, pp. 125-129) that gain their 'distinctiveness and efficacy' from their 'intermediate location in the social structure' (2012b, p. 113). As boundary organizations[2], think tanks are positioned at the edge of various legitimacies and are engaged in a *never-ending balancing act* between the four parent fields: 'a dynamic game of separation and attachment' (2012a, p. 24). This balancing act is acute when it comes to the task of maintaining economic accountability to donors and clients, whilst also attempting to construct a veneer of public credibility when addressing the worlds of politics, research and the media. As Medvetz puts it, think tanks must signal 'their cognitive autonomy to a general audience' but at the same time signal 'their *heteronomy* – or willingness to subordinate their production to the demands of clients – to a more restricted audience' (2012a, p. 18, *italics in original*).

This unique positioning means that think tanks inhabit *murky* positions that are difficult to trace and understand. This murkiness, however, is one of the main organisational strengths of think tanks. As Medvetz (2012a) argues, the *blurriness* of think tanks within the social structure has helped fuel the creation of a new type of public figure, *the policy expert*, who resides within think tanks and whose authority is built on claims and abilities to mediate relations between the various parent fields. Think tank affiliated policy experts must 'cultivate a complex mixture of skills and reflexes' (p. 41) that speak in equal measure to the parents fields by:

> … merging the intellect of a serious scholar, the procedural know-how and ability to anticipate "hot" policy issues of an "inside the Beltway" player, the willingness to "sell" one's wares of an entrepreneur, and the knack for "talking in sounds bites" and writing concise op-ed pieces of a media specialist. Thus, like the think tank itself, a policy expert must exist in "plural form" (p. 41).

Through cultivating policy experts, think tanks have been able to forge a 'privileged central location' at the 'crossroads' of the four canonical parent fields (Medvetz 2012a, p. 36). Think tanks have created, in this sense, a powerful 'institutional niche' (p. 38), capable of leveraging political and media influence, whilst at the same time promoting issues that reflect the politics of their donors, whilst also attempting (often successfully) to promote a sense of intellectual credibility.

Think tanks, political publics and elites

If we proceed with Medvetz's definition of think tanks as boundary organisations, inhabiting unique and intersecting positions between the fields of academia, politics, the market and the media, then important questions need to be asked about what role think tanks play in the *formation of publics* and making of public policy. This is because these four fields are central to the formation of publics in liberal democratic societies (cf Lippmann 1925; Dewey

1927; Anderson 1983; Habermas 1989). Think tanks, therefore, can ostensibly play powerful roles influencing the core institutions of society that contribute to the formation of public opinion, the construction of politics, and the development of policy. Think tanks can thus potentially contribute to the making of publics in ways that other organisations cannot.

Of course, defining *the public* is in itself a complex undertaking. Notions of the public are loaded and contested, and multiple conceptualisations and formations of *publics* exist (Warner 2002; Savage 2014). As Newman and Clarke (2009) argue, the public has an 'elusive character' (p. 11), informed by a range of 'shifting, contested and emergent meanings' (p. 13). In this paper, I am interested in what the growing influence of think tanks means for the making of what I have previously termed *political publics* (Savage 2013, 2014), particularly at national levels. In using the term political public, I am referring to the type of public linked to a specific polity. We can say, for example, that 'citizens' share membership of a spatially bounded political field (a local council, a nation-state, etc.). Terms like *the American people* thus presuppose the existence of a national political public with the capacity to act in collective ways. In ideal terms, national education policies and reforms should be expressions of national political publics and serve to benefit 'the people'. In a representative democracy, decisions about education should ideally emerge through representative processes of public consultation. It is this nation-focused political public over which Lippmann (1925) and Dewey (1927) famously argued, and which has underpinned the majority of intellectual debates about the public, including Habermas's (1989) work on the public sphere.

The past two decades, however, have seen a range of scholars argue that meanings associated with political publics, particularly at national levels, are being deeply transformed by factors associated with globalisation and advanced capitalism (Calhoun 1997; Sennett 2000; Marquand 2004; Newman & Clarke 2009). Public formations are now increasingly *transnational*, which makes discussions of political publics difficult to frame. Calhoun (1997) suggests that in this context, the notion of 'a single, uniquely authoritative public sphere needs to be questioned, and the manner of relations among multiple, intersecting, and heterogeneous publics needs to be considered' (p. 84). Scholars have also argued that we are witnessing the erosion of political publics by changing social, economic and governmental forces that undermine the capacities of citizens to contribute meaningfully to matters of collective interest and reform (e.g. Sennett 2000; Marquand 2004). As Newman and Clarke (2009) argue, new modes of governance are emerging in advanced liberal nations, which are resulting in new sites and practices of *publicness*, and are also transforming the delivery of public services. In education, recent contributions by Fabricant and Fine (2012), Ravitch (2010), and Lippmann (2014) suggest market reforms and private interests are weakening education as a public good. Education policies are also being influenced by a new culture of *venture philanthropy*, which is seeing philanthropic foundations adopt business-like investment strategies to fund new policy ideas and innovations (Ball & Junemann 2012; Reckhow 2013; Lippmann 2014). Powerful donors such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family

Foundation, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation are now major players in American education. These organisations have dedicated large sums of money to influence the development and adoption of education reforms that in many cases promote further corporate involvement in public education and market-based governance solutions in schools.

Despite increased difficulties associated with naming and framing contemporary publics, I believe it is still very important to consider how *national political publics* are formed and how these public formations are evolving in new contexts. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) argue, whilst transnational policy trends and influences play an increasingly significant role 'in driving national systems of education towards a similar policy outlook' (p. 42), nations still retain distinctive histories and features, and thus provide different conditions of possibility for reform. Distinctive national policy spaces have a strong bearing, therefore, on how political publics are formed at national, subnational and transnational scales. It is also significant that policies designed to exert greater national control over areas of education governance are an increasingly global trend, with multiple countries nationalising or further centralising aspects of education over the past three decades, particularly in the areas of curriculum and standards (OECD 2004; Sellar & Lingard 2013; Thompson & Cook 2014). *The national scale*, therefore, is taking on a renewed level of significance for the analysis of education policies in many nations. In addition, as my analysis to follow suggests, major think tanks tend to focus their policy work on high-stakes and high-impact reforms that play out at 'the national scale', rather than focusing on state, local or global issues. This is particularly the case in the USA. It is important, therefore, to pursue greater understanding about how think tanks contribute to the formation of national policy debates and reforms, and to the formation of national political publics.

As well as connecting theories on think tanks and publics, my other central interest in this paper is in how *political and economic elites* operate through think tanks to influence the formation of education policies and political publics. In the past decade, there has been a resurgent interest in the social and political sciences in studying the role of elites in contexts of expanding global capitalism. Savage and Williams (2008), for example, argue that a rejuvenation of elite studies is needed as staggering concentrations of wealth amass amongst the top-tier of global income earners, whilst broader income and social inequalities expand. The authors suggest greater attention is needed to global flows of money and the ways increasingly mobile elites use their power to influence social dynamics and organise societies in line with their interests. Wedel's (2009) book *Shadow Elites* analyses some of the ways such global networks of elite power and influence operate, by charting how certain individuals (whom she describes as 'flexians'), act through global networks of business, government and other institutional formations to shape policy agendas. Wedel argues that this emerging shadow elite corrupts public accountability and transparency, and also serves to undermine market competition. Gilens and Page (2014) have compiled large-scale quantitative analysis that demonstrates that in the USA 'economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts

on U.S. government policy, whilst average citizens and mass-based interested groups have little or no independent influence' (p. 564). With regards to education policy, Reckhow (2013) uses the term *shadow bureaucracy* to describe how wealthy philanthropic foundations have funded and effectively reshaped large-scale school reform processes in the USA. In a similar vein, Lipman (2014) has analysed how philanthropists in the USA use 'enormous wealth to steer public education' and to 'restructure education to serve economic competitiveness and to open up the public education sector to capital accumulation' (p. 1). I see my research as contributing to this emerging field of scholarship, by attempting to link together elites and think tanks in the making of education policy and the formation of national political publics.

The American Experience: Developing the 'Common Core'

Having established some theoretical foundations, I now turn to an exploration of think tanks in the development of national education reform, using the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in the USA as an illustrative case. The CCSS is a national set of standards in mathematics and English language arts (ELA). The CCSS initiative was established in 2009 as a rejuvenated attempt to create national standards following failed attempts in the 1990s and significant issues relating to standards-based reforms associated with the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. At the time of writing this article, forty-three states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the CCSS. Of the remaining states, Texas, Virginia, Alaska, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Indiana have not yet adopted the initiative, and Minnesota has adopted only the ELA standards.

The development of the CCSS is an illuminating example of the transformation of education policy in America by elite economic and political actors and organisations, central to which has been a host of powerful think tanks (Rothman 2011; McDonnell & Weatherford 2013). Since the mid-2000s, think tanks have exerted significant efforts with the aim of influencing the inception, development and implementation of the CCSS, working in highly strategic ways to attempt to steer the terms of debate and shape the reform. I begin this section by briefly exploring the role of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in financing CCSS developments and in advocating for the reforms. After this, I consider how three major think tanks, each headed by political elites and all financially backed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have sought to influence the CCSS: the Hunt Institute; the Alliance for Excellent Education; and the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

Venture philanthropy and the CCSS: The role of the Gates Foundation

To understand the role of major think tanks in the CCSS development process, it is necessary to begin by considering the *venture philanthropy* of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has financially backed a range of CCSS related activities. Since the mid-2000s, the Gates Foundation has

provided more than $200 million dollars to key stakeholders involved in the development of the CCSS, with $17.3 million targeted directly at research institutes and think tanks (McDonnell & Weatherford 2013, p. 493). The foundation's approach to funding CCSS initiatives has been multi-faceted and wide in scope, dispersing funds strategically across multiple think tanks to promote CCSS research and advocacy work.

The role of the Gates Foundation in the development of the CCSS has received significant attention of late, particularly as members of the media and opponents of the reforms have begun fastidiously unpicking the extent of the foundation's involvement. For example, in a wide-reaching investigative piece for *The Washington Post*, reporter Lyndsey Layton charted the remarkable depth and scope of the foundation's influence and the ways it has worked with a broad array of stakeholders to build political support for the CCSS across the country (Layton 2014). Layton describes Bill Gates as the 'de facto organizer' of the CCSS, 'providing the money and structure for states to work together on common standards in a way that avoided the usual collision between states' rights and national interests that had undercut every previous effort' (¶ 12):

> The Gates Foundation spread money across the political spectrum, to entities including the big teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, and business organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce — groups that have clashed in the past but became vocal backers of the standards. Money flowed to policy groups on the right and left, funding research by scholars of varying political persuasions who promoted the idea of common standards. Liberals at the Center for American Progress and conservatives affiliated with the American Legislative Exchange Council who routinely disagree on nearly every issue accepted Gates money and found common ground on the Common Core (Layton 2014, ¶ 13-14).

The Gates Foundation also ensured a stake in the development of the CCSS through providing significant donations to the two key organisations that formally drove the development of the CCSS: the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. This scattergun approach to funding a diverse range of policy actors and organisations proved very successful in mobilising support for the CCSS and was central to the surprisingly fast adoption of the CCSS reforms across American states (see McDonnell and Weatherford 2013).

Reckhow (2013) argues that the emerging era of venture philanthropy is seeing powerful philanthropic organisations like the Gates Foundation 'adopting a more strategic and selective approach to grant making' (p. 14). Reckhow suggests that foundations are now behaving 'more like policy entrepreneurs' and are 'increasingly willing to directly engage with politics, voicing their support for particular political leaders and specific policy proposals' (p. 14). This is certainly the case with the Gates Foundation's approach to the CCSS, with the organisation not only making its support for the standards clear through targeted funding of key stakeholders, but also through publishing its own selection of pro-CCSS materials and reports. In 2010, for example, the foundation released a report titled, '*Fewer, clearer,*

higher: Moving forwards with consistent, rigorous standards for all students' (Gates Foundation 2010). The opening section of the report captures well the political investments of the organisation in the CCSS reform and signals its intent to play a leading role in the reform movement, arguing that in addition to financially supporting the reform, the organisation has also 'been *thinking independently* about the power of such standards' (p. 2, *italics added*):

> When we at the Gates Foundation announced our education strategy in 2008, we embraced an ambitious goal: 80 percent of students graduating from high school in 2025 will be ready for college or careers … We see these rigorous, clear standards as critical to better student results. But policymakers need to build on that foundation and ensure that teachers have what they need to do their jobs: things like rich assessment systems that yield useful, timely data; tools that help teachers translate such assessments into more-effective instruction; and evaluations and compensation systems that reward teachers for improved student results … We knew that the work would have to begin with fewer, clearer, and higher standards — and with new assessment systems based on these standards. We hope this paper, which shares our beliefs about the criteria for "fewer, clearer, higher," will help state leaders wrestling with decisions as they implement new standards, assessments, and teaching tools (Gates Foundation 2010, p. 2).

In this excerpt, the Gates Foundation adopts the kind of language, strategies and goals typically found in government reports and declarations. The foundation is positioning itself not merely as a *funder* of reform but also as *a policy entrepreneur and developer*: as an active *driver* of educational transformation. This involves the setting of an ambitious national target for high school graduation, which is framed as central to building national prosperity. The organisation thus positions itself as a policy expert, seeking to provide advice that will 'help state leaders' think through the complexities of implementing the reforms. In doing so, it also signals future directions for reforms that will build upon the CCSS, including new assessment systems, instructional techniques and teacher evaluation systems. The CCSS initiative is positioned, therefore, as part of a broader set of national education reform strategies. In this context, the Gates Foundation positions itself as a core provider of *policy solutions* to governments, setting out a comprehensive package for re-shaping American education policy around standards-based reform.

Boundary spanners: The role of think tanks in the development of the CSSS

If the Gates Foundation were alone in producing policy reports and materials in support of the CCSS, it would struggle for legitimacy in an over-saturated market of policy ideas. It would also be highly vulnerable to criticism given the reform solutions it proffers require new curriculum, assessment and teacher evaluation technologies from which Bill Gates and his technology company Microsoft would arguably stand to gain. As a philanthropic organisation funded by an elite economic actor, the Gates Foundation also lacks the academic esteem of a university or research institute. A *boundary spanning* mechanism is thus required (see Medvetz

2012b, 122) to connect-up the elite *economic field* inhabited by Gates with the *academic field* needed in order to gain legitimacy for his foundation's preferred policy reform vision. A connection is also required with the *political field* in order to lobby for policy change. This is where the targeted funding of think tanks plays a central role for organisations like the Gates Foundation. As I will now argue, these organisations offer a veneer of research independence and expertise, and thus serve as a neat avenue through which money can be channeled for the purpose of formulating 'evidence' in support of particular reforms. Powerful think tanks not only have established connections with members in the political field, but also have honed media and communication strategies to connect ideas to the *media field* in order to 'sell' policy ideas to the public. Think tanks can operate, therefore, as powerful boundary spanners, capable of simultaneously traversing the fields of academia, politics, the market, and the media.

Since 2009, the Gates Foundation has targeted significant amounts of money towards think tanks that are headed by former governors who already support standards-based reforms and have been able to serve as powerful policy entrepreneurs in the development of the CCSS (McDonnell and Weatherford 2013, pp. 490-491). Former Governors James B. Hunt Jr. (The Hunt Institute), Robert Wise (The Alliance for Excellent Education) and Jeb Bush[3] (The Foundation for Excellence in Education) have each played major roles advocating for common national standards and driving CCSS development processes (Rothman 2011). With the generous support of Gates Foundation dollars, each of these former governors has been able to work strategically *through* their think tanks to mobilise significant political power and connections, and promote the benefits of the CCSS to the wider political public. McDonnell and Weatherford (2013) draw particular attention to the work of Hunt and Wise:

> Between 2006-2009, Hunt and Wise, along with their organizations, engaged in a variety of activities to win support for common standards. They met with various Washington-based groups, commissioned two National Research Council workshops on standards-based policy, and convened invitational meetings with state officials (McDonnell and Weatherford 2013, p. 491).

The Hunt Institute, which is affiliated with the University of North Carolina, has played a central role in CCSS development activities to date. Since 2009, the organisation has received more than $7 million from the Gates Foundation specifically for CCSS work. The largest grant of $5,549,352, awarded in 2009, was for a project designed 'to provide state-level policy and communications support to states seeking to rapidly implement the Common Core'[4]. This money allowed the institute to take on a major coordinating role in CCSS developments, forging policy-sharing networks between state-level stakeholders[5]. Other Gates Foundation grants received by the institute include $100,000 'to support the 2013 Governor's Education Symposium'[6] (at which the CCSS was a key topic of discussion[7]), $500,000 'to support the development of broadcast quality videos in which teachers demonstrate classroom strategies to teach the Common Core State Standards'[8], and, more recently, $1,749,070 'to support states in their continued implementation of the Common Core State Standards'[9].

According to the Hunt Institute's website, its mandate is 'to inspire elected officials and key policymakers to make informed decisions that result in improving the lives of all children through quality education'[10]. Ostensibly in line with this aim, the Hunt Institute has sought to produce highly accessible research reports and other materials about the CCSS. For example, between June 2008 and October 2010, the Hunt Institute produced a series of *Blueprint* reports, with the first report focusing on the general idea of pursuing common national standards, and then subsequent reports dealing more specifically with areas such as assessment and implementation as the CCSS initiative began to unfold. *Blueprint* is described as 'the policy primer of the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute', with each issue 'highlighting key research for policymakers and prompting discussion of solutions within states and across the nation'[11]. Each *Blueprint* is eight pages in length and adopts a glossy magazine style format. *Blueprint* assumes a clarifying tone, seeking to provide policy makers and interested members of the public with plain language insights into developments and research associated with the reforms, and information regarding implementation practices and issues. *Blueprint* reports are pitched at a national audience, but feature topics specifically relevant to state-level leaders. At the time of writing this article, the 'Knowledge Library' section of the Hunt Institute's website featured 22 downloadable reports on the CCSS, plus a number of other CCSS resources, including a series of 'video vignettes' about the CCSS and a number of news articles. To promote these various materials, the Hunt Institute has put significant money and energy into managing its media and communication strategies relating the to CCSS. As Layton (2014) notes, 'the Hunt Institute spent $437,000 to hire GMMB, a strategic communications firm owned by Jim Margolis, a top Democratic strategist and veteran of both of Obama's presidential campaigns' (¶ 58). According to Layton, 'GMMB conducted polling around standards, developed fact sheets, identified language that would be effective in winning support and prepared talking points, among other efforts' (¶ 58). The Hunt Institute was also involved in the development of a "messaging tool kit", which included 'sample letters to the editor, op-ed pieces that could be tailored to individuals depending on whether they were teachers, parents, business executives or civil rights leaders'.

It is unlikely the Hunt Institute would have received such significant funding from the Gates Foundation for CCSS activities if it were not for the political gravitas and expertise of James B. Hunt Jr., for whom standards-based reform has been a big part of his political legacy. Hunt was a four-term governor of North Carolina and was heavily involved in the early standards movement in US education, serving on the National Education Goals Panel in the early 1990s and playing a lead role in establishing the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Hunt has also received a large number of awards for his service to public education, including the prestigious James B. Conant Award and the Horace Mann League's Friend of Education Award. Similar political weight and influence is held by Robert Wise, whose Alliance for Excellent Education has received more than $16 million US from the Gates Foundation since 2009[12], and by Jeb Bush, whose Foundation for Excellence in Education has received more than $5 million in CCSS-related grants since 2010[13]. Wise, former governor of West Virginia, has been a strong advocate for

curriculum standards, raising high school graduation rates, and promoting digital learning technologies in schools. In addition to being President of the Alliance, Wise chairs the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and is an advisory committee member for the National High School Center, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida, has close links with both Hunt and Wise, and also has a strong history of supporting standards-based reform and digital technologies in schools. In 2010, Bush and Wise co-chaired the Digital Learning Council, a national initiative led by the Foundation for Excellence in Education and funded by the Gates Foundation[14] that was aimed at 'advancing state policies' in order to further the promotion of digital learning technologies in schools[15].

Like Hunt, Wise and Bush have worked through their think tanks to mobilise support for the CCSS. The Alliance has produced a large number of research reports and factsheets on the CCSS. In August 2013, for example, it published a report titled *'Common Core Standards 101'*[16], authored by Robert Rothman, a Senior Fellow at the Alliance, who was previously the study director at the National Research Council and is a well-known national education writer and expert on the history of standards-based curriculum reform in the USA. Released strategically at a time of growing state resistance to the CCSS, the report reminds state policy makers about the history and benefits of the reforms, charts the main successes to date, and provides an overview of the key factors that will facilitate effective future implementation. The Alliance website also features a wealth of other materials about the CCSS, including an FAQ section, a 'Myths vs. Facts' page, a series of blogs, and a slickly animated 3-minute video which sells the rationale and benefits of the CCSS[17]. The Foundation for Excellence in Education website features a similar breadth of CCSS resources, including: materials tailored for administrators, teachers and parents; a series of research reports and explanatory materials about the CCSS; news articles and press releases about the reform; a section titled 'Debunking Myths'; an animated video that focuses on the need for standards-based reform; and a section titled '*Communicating the Common Core*', which features a three-phase communication checklist designed 'to help state departments and lawmakers communicate the transition to higher standards and the changes that should be expected during this important shift'[18].

Whilst a trenchant analysis of each of these think tanks and their involvement in the CCSS is not possible in the scope of this paper, the brief overview I have provided gives some indication of the ways these organisations have been able to pool together various resources and strategies from the economic, political, academic and media fields to contribute to policy debates and reforms associated with the CCSS. In line with Medvetz's framework, therefore, we can see how these think tanks gain legitimacy from being able to move in and out of these four parent fields, simultaneously drawing from and speaking strategically to each. Think tanks gather, therefore, 'a combination of resources' from each parent field and assemble these 'into novel packages' (Medvetz 2012a, p. 18). With the financial backing of *economic* elites (Gates and others), each think tank has been led by an individual with significant *political* gravitas, which has afforded powerful

leverage and connections amongst state and federal leaders. Through their think tanks, these political elites have been able to lead the production of *academic* style research, presented through accessible short form reports and other materials, which have helped lend the CCSS reforms a sense of legitimacy and rigor. In turn, this pro-CCSS information has been disseminated through sophisticated *media* and communication strategies in order to make these materials accessible to the widest range of stakeholders possible. In this case, foundation dollars have allowed think tanks to play powerful and distinctive roles in the CCSS reform process in ways that neither economic, political, media nor academic actors or organisations could play alone.

Policy elites and the making of publics

> Put simply, should money and political power direct ideas, or should ideas direct themselves? (Medvetz 2012a, 226).

The growing influence of think tanks in education policy has the potential to deeply transform the foundations of public education. The trends analysed herein suggest we are witnessing a shift towards polycentric policy development as complex networks of non-government actors assume powerful new roles (Rhodes 1997; Ball & Exley 2010). As a result, policy processes are being reconstituted in ways that are resulting in a displacement and re-assemblage of previous public formations (Newman & Clarke 2009).

From a *pluralist perspective*, the rise of polycentricity and think tank influence might represent a greater diversity of voices and maybe even the emergence of a stronger civil society (see Medvetz 2012a, 8-9). However, rather than greater plurality in the political arena, my analysis suggests we are witnessing a growing *convergence* of policy ideas and practices proffered by intertwined networks of elite policy actors and organisations. As I have argued, major think tanks receive funding from *the same* philanthropists, who disperse funds strategically to promote research and advocacy linked to *the same* reforms. In the case of the CCSS, the Gates Foundation has been the central enabler of a slick and multi-faceted public relations machine that has worked in support of the CCSS and relied heavily upon think tanks for legitimacy and political gravitas.

Given the blurry positioning of think tanks and the difficulty of tracing the complex nature of contemporary policy networks, it is impossible to ever qualify in exact terms the influence these elite policy actors and organisations have wielded over the development of the CCSS. Nevertheless, my analysis adds further weight to a growing body of research evidence that suggests elite policy actors and organisations are exerting growing power over public education reforms (e.g. Ball & Junemann 2012 Fabricant and Fine 2012; Reckhow 2013; McDonnell & Weatherford 2013; Lippmann 2014). My analysis also supports the recent quantitative data of Gilens and Page (2014), who suggest economic elites exert a significant impact on the shaping of American public policy. In short, it appears that the CCSS, a national reform

with wide-reaching consequences for the future of public education in America, has been established in ways that disproportionately reflect the interests and efforts of elite networks of powerful individuals and organisations. Through mobilising significant social, economic and political influence, elite economic actors such as Bill Gates *work through* think tanks, harnessing the veneer of independence these organisations promote and the abilities of these organisations to impact upon political and media fields. Elite economic actors like Gates, and the elite political actors who lead think tanks, understand the rules of the policy game and have power and access to the machinations of policy-making processes. In other words, these elite actors wield the social, cultural economic and political capital required to influence public conversations, and can commit significant financial resources to practices that seek to influence policy debates, re-frame policy problems, and advocate for particular policy solutions. In this context, the voices of 'other' citizens who have a central stake in education reform are being marginalised – e.g. teachers and school administrators at the chalk face, parents, and young people – all of whom should have a say in shaping the future of education. Instead, influence is being exerted in highly strategic ways by a relatively small group of elites, who bring with them *particular forms* of policy expertise, evidence and solutions. The marginalisation of 'non-elite' (Milner 2015) voices may help explain why significant resistance has begun to emerge against the CCSS from activists on both sides of the political divide – most evident in the 'opt-out' movement that is gaining significant pace at the time of writing this article (see Ujifusa 2015).

Whilst my analysis herein has focused on the American context, there is evidence to suggest similar developments are emerging in other nations. Australia (*my* political public), for example, is witnessing an increasing number of think tanks that are seeking to influence education policy debates and reforms at the national level. This includes university-affiliated think tanks such as the Grattan Institute and the Whitlam Institute, free-market think tanks such as the Institute of Public Affairs and the Centre for Independent Studies, and centre-left think tanks such as the Australia Institute. In recent years, the Grattan Institute has committed significant resources in attempting to influence national education policy reforms (see Loughland & Thompson, this issue), as has the Whitlam Institute through its research into areas such as high-stakes testing[19] and federalism[20]. There also appears to be a shift in the national political imagination when it comes to the role that the non-government sector (particularly the philanthropic sector) might play in education. The recent national *Review of Funding for Schooling,* for example, argues for the benefits of expanding philanthropic involvement in Australian schooling (Australian Government 2011, 199-206). As such, whilst the role of think tanks and philanthropic groups in Australia may be significantly less pronounced in comparison to the USA, it would seem Australia is potentially moving in a similar direction to America when it comes to the role these organisations play in education policy development (Savage & O'Connor 2015). In the future, therefore, it is likely that Australia will see more strategic attempts by such organisations to influence public debates and the shaping of national education reforms.

In putting forward these arguments, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting think tanks are somehow inappropriate or should be silenced, or that ideas in education should be entirely driven by governments, bureaucracies and the expertise of 'traditional educationalists' such as academics and teachers. In fact, I believe think tanks have an important part to play in civil society and in contributing to the public conversation. Another caveat I want to place on my analysis is that in suggesting elite policy actors are driving the displacement of previous public formations, I am not wishing to imply that there was ever a 'golden age' of the national political public that is now facing death. As Fraser's (1992) critique of Habermas demonstrates, the golden age of the public *never was*. In suggesting new publics are emerging, therefore, I am not longing for a return to an ideal/imagined political public of years gone. Instead, in the spirit of Newman and Clarke (2009), I see the public as something that is (and has always been) *in flux*: a mobile and flexible set of social forces and relations that is forever being re-produced and re-assembled. With this in mind, however, it is still possible to argue that the continued expansion of elite influence could see contemporary notions of the public 'evolve' in ways that see it take on similar exclusionary forms to the 19th century bourgeois public sphere. As Fraser argues, the kind of civil society that typified the bourgeois public spheres of France, England and Germany in the 19th century were constituted by a 'network of clubs and associations – philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural' that were 'anything but accessible to anyone' (Fraser 1992, p. 114). There is good reason to be critical, therefore, about practices of exclusion that could potentially emerge from the coalescence of elite powers in contemporary policy making.

For this reason, I suspect that whilst Medvetz provides a powerful conceptual framework for understanding contemporary think tanks, he may be potentially too quick to dismiss 'elite theory perspectives' on think tanks. Whilst I agree with Medvetz (2012) that not *all* think tanks have links to 'the rich and powerful' and some do 'orient themselves *against* ruling class interests' (p. 9, *italics in original*), as far as the CCSS reforms go, it is clear that policy development and advocacy for the standards has been driven to a significant degree by a powerful group of elite political and economic actors and organisations, and that think tanks have played a central part in these processes with the financial backing of the Gates Foundation. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the CCSS would have succeeded to date without the financial backing of the Gates Foundation to mobilize a broad coalition of elite political actors and experts (see McDonnell and Weatherford 2013, 491-493). There appears to be some merit, therefore, in retaining and expanding upon elite theory perspectives, which frame think tanks as embedded within powerful and exclusive networks that tend to express a 'ruling class political agenda' (Medvetz 2012, 8).

Linked to this, Medvetz may also be missing the extent to which each of the four parent fields of academia, politics, business, and media are dominated and often constituted by elite actors, networks and powers, and can thus be considered 'elite fields'. Think tanks, therefore, can rightly be seen as inhabiting 'a space between' (p. 25) these fields, but I believe that these fields need to be understood as both products of (and producers of) elite powers.

Indeed, as academics, both Medvetz and I are engaging in a form of 'elite conversation' about think tanks – a view that aligns with Milner's recent (2015) argument that intellectuals represent the 'cultural elite'. This, of course, poses a significant problem for researchers interested in understanding the role of elite policy actors. For example, how might we reconcile a revived interest in elite theory with recognition of *our positioning* in elite fields? Put differently, I recognise the irony in suggesting that we should critique the enhanced powers of elite policy actors to influence policy debates, whilst writing from the position of a policy researcher in an elite university who also has enhanced access to contribute to public conversations about education reform processes.

In conclusion, further theoretical and empirical work is needed in this space to examine how meanings and practices associated with the political public are being transformed as policy elites work through think tanks to influence policy debates, re-frame policy problems and advocate for particular policy solutions. In this context, important questions need to be asked about changing relationships between democracy, elite formations and education as a public good. Ultimately, if the making of public education continues to be dwarfed by the interests of elites and by expertise generated by organisations that are funded by elites, then the *publicness* of education will continue be radically transformed and narrowed, and the potential of education as a force for collective social change will be increasingly threatened.

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[1] In political and sociological theory, the terms 'elite' and 'political elite' (as well as 'cultural elite' and 'economic elite') are conceptually contested, and there has been a long history of debate over exactly

what constitutes 'the elite' (see Mills 1956; Zuckerman 1977; Milner 2015). In this paper, I understand political elites to be those individuals with high status, visibility and capacity to exert a disproportionate influence over political and policy processes. This may include individuals who are (or have been) in political office, or those that occupy positions that offer powerful opportunities to influence political and policy processes. As the foundational theory of C. W. Mills (1956) suggests, and as Milner (2015) has more recently argued, political elites are constituted by an incredibly small proportion of the wider population, but are nevertheless able to dominate political processes.

[2] Medvetz's conceptualisation of thinks tanks as 'boundary organisations' shares some similarities with Lubienski, Scott and DeBray's (2011) concept of 'intermediary organizations' (IOs) that serve to assemble, produce and promote evidence tailored for policy makers. Medvetz's framework, however, is specific to think tanks, whereas Lubienski, Scott and DeBray's concept of IOs focuses broadly on think tanks, philanthropies, policy coalitions and advocacy organisations.

[3] During the writing of this article, in February 2015, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice assumed the role of Chair of the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

[4] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2009/11/OPPCR055

[5] In this paper, my analysis of the Hunt Institute's activities is aided by an interview I conducted with a senior policy member of the organisation in early 2013. Whilst this empirical interview data has not been used directly in this paper, it has been crucial in informing my understanding of the organisation's involvement in the CCSS.

[6] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2013/05/OPP1090770

[7] http://www.hunt-institute.org/elements/media/files/2013_GES_Program.pdf

[8] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2013/08/OPP1095306

[9] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2013/10/OPP1082243

[10] http://www.hunt-institute.org/about-us/

[11] http://www.hunt-institute.org/knowledge-library/articles/2008-6-1/blueprint-number-1/

[12] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database#q/k=%22Alliance%20for%20Excellent%20Education%22

[13] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database#q/k=%22Foundation%20for%20Excellence%20in%20Education%22

[14] http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Grants-Database/Grants/2010/10/OPP1023987

[15] http://digitallearningnow.com/about/

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