Parents, carers, and policy labor: Policy networks and new media

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Abstract
Based on literacy policy educational reform in Australia, this article explores the role of new media, policy labor and what small data analysis can reveal about parents and carers as networked policy actors. Using qualitative critical network (QCN) analysis, legacy and social media data, this article provides a snapshot of how policy actors interact online to labor for education reform. This article shows that parent and carer advocacy is central to the success of the universal synthetic phonics (USP) social media campaign in Australia. It also shows that analysis of the new media networks that connect policy actors should be a core part of understanding policy dynamics in the 21st century.

Keywords
Network ethnography, parent and carer advocacy, policy labor, social media, social network analysis

This article explores the role of social media in enabling parents and carers to become key actors in education policy advocacy. It shows how policy labor techniques, like hyper-connecting multiple accounts, creates networked policy actors. Parent and carer advocacy is a core part of policy labor in education, however, it is often treated as peripheral to policy research agendas which seek to critique global policy actors like publishing companies and think tanks. As social media has provided tools outside of traditional school processes for collectivization, this article argues for renewed attention on parents and carers as key policy actors in education. Parents and carers are experts in policies which affect their own children’s education and their policy labor has a long history in education. Moreover, social media has provided a conduit for what Brooks (2012) calls

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the “massification of the intellectual enterprise,” effectively democratizing policy expertise, to include “journalists and bloggers, political, social and environmental activists, some public officials, certain talk show hosts, and even some celebrities” (p. 73). I argue in this article that parents and carers can be added to this list of new media policy actors who engage in policy labor when discussing education policy.

Policy labor is the process of enabling policy mobilization. It involves diverse experts who move between sectors and geographic locations (Larner and Laurie, 2010) who engage in the labor of developing and advocating for policy. These actors borrow policy from global locations and adapt it to local environments (Peck and Theodore, 2015) and are often the focus of policy research. For example, Ball (2017) describes how he mapped the network activities of a policy actor in the Indian education system to show the mobilization of policy. However, he does caution that policy researchers should be aware of what Larner and Laurie (2010) describe as the “‘middling’ actors, as well as the hegemonic institutions and actors . . . who feature in most existing accounts” (p. 224). In a massified policy expertise market where competitive advantage lies in understanding the desires of the constituents as well as the political agenda of policy makers (Abelson, 2012), new media provides a policy labor space. New media provides an environment to both test voter confidence, engage in public debate, reconfigure concepts based on that engagement (Barnes, 2017) and advocate for policy reform. As such, a policy network analysis in the second decade of the 21st century would be remiss to disregard the agency of the space.

This article focuses on the new media mobilization of universal synthetic phonics (USP) policy in Australia. New media does not just include social media sites like Twitter, but also blogging and legacy media that encourages social media interaction. It is common practice in Australia to “live tweet,” while viewing media broadcasts and this article begins analysis with the Twitter activity during a live broadcast on YouTube of a phonics debate. New media analysis in this article shows that parents and carers are also powerful new media policy actors.

By bringing together network theory and social media small data methodologies, gateways are opened to identifying new media policy actors. The research approach can also help “identify the paths and pipelines, and nodes and activities through which policy moves, and the discourses and culture which articulate the policy community it represents” (Ball, 2016). What this article, as part of a larger project on new media and education policy, will show is how parent and carers can be networked policy actors. In other words, they are collectivized experts in their own children’s experiences of education who act as new media policy laborers, engaging with policy proposals from global environments, discussing and debating them, hyperlinking, and hyper-connecting the traditional policy actors in education. Furthermore, this article will show the possibilities for education policy research that uses social media small data as a tool for inquiry.

Network rhetoric forms the theoretical basis for this article. In a platform environment where policy mobility is increasingly the focus of policy scholarship, it is timely to consider the role of information communication networks as new media policy actors in themselves, not simply as a policy mobility conduit. Network agency is most often associated with big data where a viral phenomenon, generally mediated by a hashtag, acts as an illocutionary force, encouraging individuals to act by contributing to a networked
This article will show that policy labor is discernable within hashtag mediated texts that are not viral, like #phonicsdebate which was the official moniker for an Australian phonics debate event broadcast 31 July 2018. Analysis of this hashtag shows how policy actors, including parents and carers, have used Twitter to engage in policy labor.

Social media big data research has been illuminating new media policy labor in global contexts for over a decade. Only recently has small data begun to make inroads with the potential to show how the global information communication networks connect distinct policy actors, locally, nationally and internationally. Small data are associated with qualitative approaches to social media analysis where the data points are few enough to analyze by hand with little or no algorithmic analysis (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017). As education constitutes a vibrant (Baroutsis et al., 2018) but contained social media user community (Bruns et al., 2012), it is a useful field for small data analysis.

This article uses qualitative critical network (QCN) analysis (Barnes, 2020) as a network ethnographic technique to illuminate the policy actors, advocacy networks and strategies of a literacy campaign in Australia. While debate over the best way to teach reading has been a part of the literacy education landscape for decades (Green et al., 1994), the most recent iteration focuses on ensuring the approach tested by cognitive science is universally taught in Australian schools (henceforth referred to as USP). In December 2019, the Australian State Federal Ministers for Education met in Alice Springs, in Central Australia, to discuss the future of education policy and institutions. All ministers, regardless of political leaning, agreed to the recommendations regarding implementing USP (Tehan, 2019) and arguably left critics of USP unable to find traction in the debate.

Before moving into the analysis, it is important to further contextualize this article in parent and carer advocacy, the mediatization of education policy, and network theory typically utilized in education policy research.

Parent and carer advocacy in education

Parent and carer policy labor in schools has been a part of the education policy landscape for decades. With a few notable exceptions that centralize schooling as a community enterprise (see, e.g. the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities in Australia—Luke et al., 2013), much of the research on parent and carer involvement in school policy making positions parents as problematic. Generally, parents and carers are treated as peripheral and literature is largely concerned with how to regulate parent and carer input (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Though parents and carers have continuously been identified as mobilized policy actors in school reform (McGuinn, 2012), they continue to be positioned as problematic. For example, the work which concentrates on the neoliberalization of education positions parents and carers as policy actors who are manipulated by a political economy (Saltmarsh and McPherson, 2019). This approach to parent and carer policy labor is often investigated through “school choice.” In such research, parents and carers have been positioned by education policy as being gifted the ability to improve the education system via market forces by having the freedom to move their children to whichever school they believe is best for their child. This has manifested in several researched phenomena: providing parents and carers with digital appraisal tools, like the
My School Website in Australia, which provides parents and carers with ways to calculate choice against socioeconomic and assessment factors (Gobby, 2016); pamphlet production about how No Child left Behind Policies claim standardized test scores will give parents the best information about their child’s schooling (Hursh, 2007); and how the Academy System in Britain feeds the dreams of working class parents with cruel optimism (Kulz, 2017). Such research shows that education policy has impinged upon parents and carers, positioning families as passive in education policy labor, and the increased neoliberalization of education governance.

However, parents and carers are not passive in the mobilization of education policy. Parent and carer activism is present in social justice-oriented education that considers the education needs of differently powerful social groups. For example, Luke and colleagues (2013), developed an educational program that actively involved Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in educational policy. However what Berkowitz and colleagues (2017) found is the more common story. They reported that while parents and carers from non-dominant ethnicity groups would like to be involved in their children’s schooling, the education policies limited their ability. The complexity of balancing the engagement of parents in developing education policies and the need to regulate interference is also evident. Oría and colleagues (2007) found that when parents chose their local government school, even when they had the means to choose a private school, they continued to agitate within the school on an increased level when they perceived the school was not acting in the best interests of their child.

The regulation of parent and carer advocacy is also found in research associated with the intensive bureaucratization of education. For example, Comber and Nixon (2009) found that the introduction of mandated reporting templates, intended to limit parent complaints about inadequate reporting, increased teacher workloads because the wording was too vague for public consumption. As such, parents demanded personalized feedback from teachers leading to policies about weekly emails and phone calls. A more recent example is the global implementation of Class Dojo, an app that uses similar software to social media. The app allows parents and carers to monitor their child’s behavior and through which the teacher can communicate with the family. Williamson (2017) critiques Class Dojo because it is not developed by educators and is not based on sound pedagogical practice. However, the reality is that, despite the criticisms, Class Dojo has become a global phenomenon that has eased the relationship between home and school.

In all policy efforts to contain parent and carer complaints or to protect the school system from parents, carers or software companies who, it is regularly argued, do not understand it, parent and carer policy labor continues to affect the organization and governance of the school system. The capabilities of social media to collectivize parent and carer advocacy is a more recent trend where parents and carers can embark on policy advocacy in education beyond the local school or district. The presence of parents and carers as new media policy actors has been noted by Baroutsis and Woods’ (2019) who, through social media network analysis, found a strong, but hostile, parent and carer presence in a 2017 Twitter literacy debate. There was similar evidence of hostility within the data gathered for this current project, but this analysis acknowledges that while parents and carers may not follow the rules of debate that should not preclude them from the debate, nor lead to findings that suggest parents and carers should be educated or regulated.
It is easy to conflate the assumption in education research that parents and carer contributions need to be regulated with the well-documented trolling environment of social media, but this article aims to problematize this assumption as epistemologically unbalanced. Instead, this article positions parents and carers as new media policy experts who intimately understand the policies associated with their own children’s education, collectivize on social media with other parents and carers, health professionals, teachers, and researchers, to advocate as a network for policy change.

Network theory and mediated education policy

Networks that develop online consist of multiple types of new media policy actors that move together as a data-force that policy makers read and respond to. Until recently, networks of policy mobility in education have concentrated on global players like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; Lewis, 2017) and Pearson (Hogan et al., 2016). Lingard (2016) has also considered the role of think tanks as part of the network of policy actors which affect education, specifically the Center for Independent Studies (CIS). CIS also emerged as a new media policy actor within the data represented in this article. These projects are vital for understanding who is represented and has influence in policy networks but as suggested above, there are less obvious policy actors at work. As the Ministers for Education are beholden to their constituents as well as their party agenda, it is difficult to make the assertion that these hegemonic institutions, like think tanks, Pearson and the OECD, fully control public policy. While the theory of influence is persuasively documented in these projects, it is important to supplement the nascent network ethnographies with research that pays attention to the “middling actors,” (Larner and Laurie, 2010) who engage in policy labor. While this article does not pretend to fill this analytical gap, more demonstrate a way to address the empirical imbalance, it does illuminate one instance of policy mobility in action. The power of the regular person to shift practice is central to digital methods. As the platforms are largely mediated by consumers, “the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong . . . [lends] a political dimension to everyday practices” (de Certeau, 1984: xviii). What this article proposes is new media has connected the traditionally “minor” or fragmented publics as a networked voice, or new media policy actor.

The conundrum of influence faced by institutional policy actors, like lobbyists and think tanks, is the competition for constituents. Thus, a policy advocacy think tank, like CIS (’t Hart and Vromen, 2008), works to influence both public opinion through media events or reassemble policy nuance through public events like debate or current affairs programs with associated hashtags. The phonics debate was organized by CIS and is a typical new media policy strategy. Therefore, it would be tempting to dismiss parent and carer involvement as evidence of public influence. However, as stated earlier, the parents and carers are experts in the education policies which affect their children, so it is impossible to say who influenced who. This is evidenced by the public intellectual activities of the collectivized new media network of parents and carers. These activities include blogging and the development of activist institutions and lobby groups for children with dyslexia. It is better to define the relationship between CIS and the parents and carers advocates as what Ball (2016) describes as
members of a “small community” have come to know each other well, they share the same values which inform their choices and commitments: and they generate and share persuasive arguments that can be used in more hostile contexts (Grek, 2013: 56). They meet regularly and are involved in various forms of cooperation and exchange in relation to specific policy projects. All of this is underpinned, enabled, and grown through other social interactions, including friendship histories. These relationships and interactions serve to increase and maintain network robustness. (p. 556)

The above quote defines what new media scholars have identified as invisible colleges (Quan-Haase et al., 2015) at work on social media. The digital labor that establishes networks of influence online involves regular interactions on the timeline of Twitter and in the hidden spaces like direct message groups on WhatsApp, Slack, Facebook Messenger, or Twitter. New media policy actors write blogs and exchange ideas, promote each other’s digital texts, strategize for the often-hostile environment of Twitter, link people to policy experts like academics and think tank contributors, and demonstrate expertise by engaging in what Marwick and boyd (2011) refer to as authenticity labor—like sharing personal histories. These virtual networks are being shown to be powerful on a global scale (Blevins et al., 2019), connecting traditionally disparate people into an agentic new media policy network.

This research presents a representation of one of these policy networks laboring for policy change. Analyzing the social media backchannel can provide insight into who the new media policy actors are and also how hashtags and networks are policy labor that needs further scrutiny in education policy research.

**Education in the media**

Education researchers have engaged in extensive examinations of the mediatization of education (see, e.g, Mockler, 2013, 2018). This type of work begins with the conceptualization that the media provides the public with their primary source of information about the education system (Mills and Keddie, 2010). While following on from this position, how this article differs is in the use of the media to illuminate the policy actors and networks in education policy labor. These new media policy actors represent education in order to affect policy, specifically on social media. Similar to Hattam et al. (2009) analysis of the public engagement strategies of Australian Federal Ministers for Education and media commentators, this article updates this type of work with political analysis processes that are regularly used in communications research, specifically social media research (see, e.g. Bruns, 2019).

Traditional academic policy actors were present in the data, using new media designed for policy labor—academic blog sites. Blogging is a core part of social media advocacy and academic blogs like *The Conversation* (Australia) and the Australian Association of Research in Education’s blog *EduResearch Matters* are part of a social media industry that has developed for that agenda in Australian education. Both academic blogs claim to advocate to policy makers, positioning them as part of the impact and engagement agenda embedded in Australian academic job descriptions. However, it is easy for academic blogs to be left behind in the mobile policy marketplace. Social media companies
are interested in how the network acts and works to respond to the needs of the users with speed and flexibility and are less interested in what a blog says than what reaction it gets. Mobilized policy labor in platform environments works well when policy actors incorporate the online habits of the users who comment on their work. It is also interesting to note that advocates for USP were using a far greater variety of texts than just blogs—petitions, podcasts, YouTube broadcasts, professional journals, and various social media private groups.

Unfortunately, the evidenced violence of online spaces has resulted in academics choosing to not engage in new media activities or electing to tackle less controversial problems (Barlow and Awan, 2016). While this does not mean the end of use for the academic expert, it does mean that academic research will be increasingly brokered by those who do use new media strategies, like think tanks (Abelson, 2012). Furthermore, it is important to understand that on social media these networked policy actors can be social media influencers, like parents and carers who are bloggers and activists. In the data presented in the next section, traditional policy advocacy actors—think tanks and academics—are present, but this article is most concerned with the development of parent and carer new media policy networks that can act in ways similar to, and as powerfully, as these traditional actors.

The phonics debate on social media

The phonics debate was hosted by the Australian College of Educators and the CIS on 31 July 2019. The debate was also streamed live on YouTube and is still available for viewing (Australian College of Educators, 2018). Those in the physical and virtual audience were encouraged to live tweet the debate using the hashtag #phonicsdebate. The proposition presented for debate was that Phonics in Context was not Enough, but it was explained there was no intended winner except robust dialogue. For the proposition (for USP) was cognitive scientist, Dr Ann Castles, contributor to CIS and director of literacy project Five from Five, Dr Jennifer Buckingham, and a principal of Sydney suburban school. Disputing the proposition were advocates for socio-cultural approaches to literacy (SCL) Emeritus Professor of Education and Arts Robyn Ewing, education academic Dr Kathleen Rushton, and a second Sydney suburban principal. The research presented below collected data from the night of the debate and for 1 week afterwards to capture tweets of those “catching up” on YouTube.

Qualitative analysis of the tweets and media objects from the 18 months following the debate showed some sustained policy labor noted in the debate data collection. The datasets have allowed identification of the longevity of new media policy labor. Eighteen months were chosen because, in December 2019, the Australian Federal and State Education Ministers agreed to pursue a USP policy agenda (Department of Education Skills Employment, 2019).

It should be noted that in both new media policy advocacy events, the global mobilization of literacy policy was referenced, though not substantiated. For example, while the tweets were limited to what the Twitter application programming interface (API) determined as located in Australia, retweets showed that people were watching the YouTube debate from the United States of America and China.
Methodology

QCN digital approaches are committed to the qualitative techniques which look at the multiple layers of information in data texts, and in the case of the research presented below, social media data texts. Linked to network ethnography, QCN analysis differs from traditional situated qualitative work in that it iteratively considers a widespread political sentiment which has been commented on by multiple people in disparate locations. It seeks to understand how subjective actors link themselves to the generalizable network. Social media is a key data resource for this type of work, particularly the analysis of hashtags. Hashtags are hyperlinked key words on social media that, when taken up by many, can be mediated ad hoc publics, or spaces where actors gather to discuss political and social issues online (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). Hashtags allow actors to determine how they want to become a part of the widespread phenomenon, and each inclusion of a hashtag shapes and reshapes representations of the issue under scrutiny. This article considers the use of the Twitter hashtags #phonicsdebate and #4corners to consider who the policy actors are that insert themselves into an education issue network.

The QCN approach used for this article involved running algorithms to map a network alongside political sentiment (USP or SCL). QCN analysis goes further than trust in the algorithm to accurately present the network by massaging of the raw data to help the underlying code. Big data algorithmic analysis techniques often miss evidence of actors because the algorithm relies on consistent coding like the use of the @ symbol in linking users. This approach adjusted for that limitation because the dataset was smaller. For example, an academic without a Twitter account can be allocated a hypothetical account within the data. This allows representations of networks to include multiple variants of a name: see Table 1 for example.

QCN approaches are critical because researchers both question and resist the nodocentricity in network methods (Mejias, 2010) that rely on algorithms and institutional actors (see, e.g. Gerrard, 2018) by actively reconstructing and co-constructing, not just deconstructing, the representation of networks. Related to critical data scholarship which closely considers the selection of data (Luka and Millette, 2018), QCN approaches also consider the representations made from the data. While data selection questions are still relevant, QCN approaches broadly consider the situatedness of data points within a field and require its researchers to be as educated as possible about the critical questions which

| Hypothetical Twitter account | Possible variants (could include misspelling) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| @ProfessorX                 | Professor X  PX                               |
|                             | Prof X  DrX                                   |
|                             | X  Profesor                                  |
|                             | Ex                                            |
| @HarleyQuinn                | Professor Quinn  Harly Quinn                  |
|                             | Prof Quinn                                   |
|                             | Dr Quinn  HQ                                  |

Table 1. QCN raw data massaging.
face that field in asking questions of the data. For example, when reading nodocentric policy actor research in Australia and listening to the effects of that research in professional discussions at my institution, I expected the central hyper-connector to be Jennifer Buckingham or the CIS who hosted the debate. While there was evidence to support such a hypothesis, alternative readings of the agency of parents and carers and policy laborers, suggest more nuance is needed in such claims.

QCN approaches are complementary research because they aim to map a network. The network can be grounded geographically, socially, economically, politically, or theoretically, but the subsequent network acts as a map of the field that holds more detail than a big data map, and also less than is possible in rich, ethnographic, situated maps. The new media policy network represented below uses the concept of invisible colleges, traditionally used to describe scholarly citation networks (Crane, 1972), updated to consider online social network visibility (Quan-Haase et al., 2015), and adapted again in this article to use hashtags to consider the agency of new media policy labor. In other words, the method described below works on the assumption that social network analysis will reveal insights into the nature of literacy policy advocacy in Australia. However, instead of starting with an assumed influential actor and working outwards through citation networks, this approach starts with building the hashtag network.

**Data collection**

The social media analyses were conducted using three different data collection approaches outlined below. Two involved Twitter and the other manual Internet archive research. The API of Twitter provides the framework for these data to be downloaded in machine-readable format, and this API access is provided explicitly so that third parties, including researchers and commercial service providers, are able to access such public content in a standardized fashion and at high volume.

The data points were read to ensure all tweets related to the phonics debate. Those that did not were deleted leaving 2150 data points (tweets) from 376 Twitter users in the first dataset and 1632 tweets from 330 Twitter users in the second dataset.

**Twitter databank.** The first Twitter dataset was provided by the Australian Digital Observatory’s Twitter database using #phonicsdebate, #phonicscheck, associated key words “teaching + reading,” and “phonics.” These were collected from the 2-week period surrounding a live-streamed YouTube debate about the value of USP on 31 July 2018. The tweets were those from identified Australian Twitter accounts, but the dataset did include international participation if an Australian account retweeted a broadcast. Tweet extraction did not include tweets or profile information from Twitter accounts that were “protected,” that is, those whose tweets and profile details are accessible only to other users approved by the account holder.

This Twitter dataset was collected 14 months after the phonics debate in September 2019. This means that it is not a complete representation of the tweets at the time as those involved in the live tweets could have deleted their tweets, a common practice on Twitter. This approach ethically considers people’s rights to be forgotten (Rosen, 2012) online.
Ad hoc data scrape. The second Twitter dataset was scraped from the Twitter API using TAGS, an open access tool linked to Google Sheets, and the hashtag #4corners. Four Corners is a current affairs program that airs weekly on the Australian Broadcast Corporation’s television and streaming service ABC iView, meaning this dataset had a broader viewer base than the first dataset. In this instance, only 2 days of tweets were scraped as opposed to the week of the first dataset, so does not account for catch-up viewers. However, the dataset is useful for examining the longevity of new media policy labor in regard to USP advocacy.

Manual Internet archival research. The third small data collection was of media objects using the following parameters: they needed to be about the Australian phonics debate, published between June 2018 and December 2019 or hyperlinked in the collected phonics debate tweets. I collected 96 media objects. By analyzing their content, I coded them to USP or SCL. Using CrowdTangle, I assessed their interaction data on Facebook to get a sense of their impact.

Ethical considerations. The analysis represented below was conducted by collecting small data. This type of Internet data is subject to some of the most rigorous ethical approval protocols developed in the last decade. Social media research using small data protocols have tightened, especially in regard to the trustworthiness of a researcher. A small data researcher does not rely on algorithms but reads data collected, often with a consent waiver. The waiver pivots on the social media users being rational and intelligent adults who signed up to Twitter cognizant their data could be used by third parties for research. For example, with the exception of information from “protected” accounts, Twitter posts and profile information are public, and can be viewed by anyone, whether logged into the platform or not. However, while the materials posted by Twitter users are public, they are often posted with a specific context and audience in mind. While the Twitter API is clear about the availability of social media data for research, Fiesler and Proferes (2018) found that the Twitter users they canvassed were not aware that their tweets could be used for research. They also expressed beliefs that researchers should not use their tweets without permission; however, these attitudes were contextual dependent on the identity of the researcher and the nature of the research. This is understandable as small data present a risk of data violence that should be mitigated by treating Twitter data as potentially sensitive, despite its original public posting, store and manage the data securely, and very closely consider the necessity of direct-quoting data used in publications. Furthermore, a database preserves content outside of its original context of publication. As such, small data researchers work to provide better context for that data by reading it in time, space, and hashtag context. However, a misunderstanding of the discursive context of participants’ contributions is possible, which is why small data research should be treated as abductive and speculative rather than other forms of argumentative logic. It is impracticable and potentially unethical to gain full consent before canvassing tweets as one individual tweeter cannot provide consent for their associated network. I have previously written on the ethical use of ancillary, hyperlinked social media data to aid analysis (Barnes et al., 2015) arguing that until third party usage of small data is more visible and continuously in the public sphere, social media broadcasts should not be directly quoted
in publications, even with informed consent, due to the possibility of breached anonymity via search engines. As such, the research below will discuss findings in themes without direct quotation of individual social media broadcasts.

**Findings and discussion**

Using the open source network analysis tool Gephi and Force Atlas 2 algorithm to explore the social network of the phonics debate on 31 July 2018, Figure 1 shows two distinct groups using Twitter to live tweet. By analyzing each tweet, the individual actors were coded USP (blue actors on the right—USP) or advocates for socio-cultural approaches to literacy (orange on the left—SCL). Those tweeters who did not actively take a side in the debate were colored gray.

The Force Atlas 2 algorithm shows the two distinctive groups were connected and also largely contained. Each side is aware the other exists as is evident through the few connections which link the two sides together (Bruns, 2019). The debate format allowed the analysis to show the two opposing sides were aware of each other when usually small data analysis will leave the small groups of tweeters unconnected. Such representations gives the data the illusion of a filter bubble.

This visualization of a network is interpreted by reading the edges (linking lines) clockwise. The advocates of USP are actively using Twitter to discuss USP with several hyper-connectors at the center of the network. The central node, a parent of a dyslexic child, is consuming, creating, and distributing content related to the USP position in the phonics debate. This is represented by the daisy shape of the edges attached to their
node—content is both coming to the parent and the parent is retweeting or responding to that content. This indicates that parent is first an enthusiastic Twitter user. On closer inspection of the parent’s tweets, they are also a blogger. Furthermore, the parent is distributing blogs and tweets by health academics and professionals, think tank personnel, teachers, and the USP advocates involved in the debate.

What is also evident in this visualization is that the SCL advocates are not using the Twitter backchannel in the same way as USP advocates. As the key nodes are being tweeted at (edges are mostly anti-clockwise)—those who the Twitter users see as an authority in the field of SCL are not actively responding to the debate. This could be for several reasons. First, the SCL advocates could have chosen to not engage with the phonics debate online because of the limitations of the genre for academic nuance or previous bad experiences with debating education issues on Twitter (see, e.g. McKnight and Graham, 2018). Second, the data were accessed from an archive 14 months after the debate. This means some tweeters could have deleted their tweets—though it is doubtful all of them would have. Third, the SCL advocates might not be skilled in the affordances of new media, nor aware of how it has been collectively harnessed by the USP advocates. The former can be observed through the SCL development of one academic blog that assigned 180 signatures to it (https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=4938). This suggests a traditional understanding of expertise associated with academic status, rather than an understanding that social media preferences prolific content creation and affective community development. The latter supposition is supported by the co-ordinated usage of
media by all USP advocates over the 18 months after the phonics debate which is discussed in further detail below. This campaign saw the SCL advocates continuously placed in reactive positions which responded too slowly for the media cycle. For example, the above blog that had 180 literacy expert signatures was released 2 months after the event that prompted it. While this is a relatively short turn around for traditional academic policy critique, there had meantime been three USP policy labor moments. By the time the blog was released, the media policy cycle had moved on.

Before concluding that a parent could be the key influencer in a network analysis that included traditional policy actors like think tanks and academics, the data were manipulated to centralize the debaters. While five out of the six debaters had a Twitter account, it was not always linked into the tweets. Furthermore, as Ewing did not have a Twitter account, she was not present in the initial analysis, making the original analysis unrepresentative of the debate. As such, the raw Twitter data were tweaked so the social networking software would recognize when Ewing was spoken about in the data. The same adjustment was applied to the other debaters when they were referred to by the live tweeters but not directly linked into the tweet. Figure 2 shows the same network as Figure 1 after manipulating the data to show all instances when Castles, Buckingham, Ewing, Rushton, and the two principals were mentioned in the data.

The network still showed the same parent as a hyper-connector, actively linking the USP network together and revealed that two other parents of children with dyslexia were also central to the network. Other influencers included a

Figure 3. Alignment of texts about Australian phonics from July 2018 to December 2019.
practicing psychologist, a phonics program, a dyslexia lobby group account, and a speech therapy and cognitive psychology academic. I have theorized how this network might have been developed by considering the actors alongside the literature on affective publics and digital intimacy (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015). When a parent is concerned that their child is struggling to read, they might first use the Internet to investigate possibilities. This behavior would most likely include joining Facebook groups with likeminded parents. Those groups would suggest connection with psychologists or speech therapists who, more often than not, advocate for USP (Baroutsis and Woods, 2019). Some parents might access health academic research as a part of informing themselves. As academic research is often inaccessible to the public, health academics that maintain personal blogs would gain readership and online connections. By the time a parent access SCL literature and blogs (of which there are evidently few), an affective bond would have been formed with the USP approach. If so, and this is should be the focus of future research in this field, online affective bonds are a significant phenomenon largely ignored by critical digital literacy approaches.

The next step was to investigate how sustained the USP advocacy was, as opposed to the SCL advocacy. The phonics debate was an organized event that advocated for the use of Twitter and deliberately created a binary that suits Twitter’s functionality (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). Figures 3 and 4 show that USP advocates were more prolific, had greater

![Figure 4. Facebook impressions of texts about Australian phonics from July 2018 to December 2019.](image-url)
variety and were engaged with on a significantly larger scale than SCL advocates over the 18-month period.

Table 2 shows that a large proportion of those media objects were developed by parents.

Closer analysis of the tweets associated with one of the media objects, the Australian current affairs program Four Corners (ABC News in Depth, 2019) was conducted to determine if grassroots advocacy from parents and carers was also present in the live tweeting of that program. In this analysis, the social network is represented without text

Figure 5. Tweets from phonics debate policy actors using #4corners.

Table 2. Authorship of media objects.

| Role                        | Balanced article (%) | SCL (%) | USP (%) | Grand total (%) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| Health academic             | .08                  | –       | 37.72   | 37.80           |
| Parent                      | –                    | –       | 33.48   | 33.48           |
| Education academic          | –                    | 8.65    | 4.70    | 13.35           |
| Consultant/health professional | –                  | .02     | 9.24    | 9.26            |
| Teacher                     | –                    | –       | 3.62    | 3.62            |
| Think tank                  | –                    | –       | 2.50    | 2.50            |
| Grand total                 | .08                  | 8.67    | 91.26   | 100             |

SCL: socio-cultural approaches to literacy; USP: universal synthetic phonics.
manipulation. The result in Figure 5 shows that several original tweeters from the phonics debate were actively discussing the program, including two original USP debaters and the parent advocates. However, the network is not as connected.

The lack of connection could be that the connections between filter bubbles were made more visible by the genre of social media debate. Bruns (2019) explains that the popular tropes of filter bubbles and echo chambers are not complex enough to explain quote tweeting, or the practice of social media debate where people share their opposition’s point of view in order to critique it. Furthermore, this event, and other legacy media objects, had a wider audience than the regular Twitter phonics debate actors, making connection using the hashtag more difficult. Influential Twitter accounts in the wider Australian political sphere are also present in the analysis, such as the prime minister and key legacy media journalists. The presence of these figures suggests future iterations of the policy actor research presented in this article should better situate education policy debate within the broader online public sphere.

Conclusion

The network analysis of the phonics debate complements research about policy actors in the Australian education landscape by showing that parents and carers can be influential policy actors. New media policy actors link and share information produced by other policy actors including unions, think tanks, principals, health professionals, and teachers into their networks and can generate enough hyper-connectivity between those actors to be considered a networked policy actor in their own right. While well-established policy advocates, like the CIS, might hold influential policy power offline, social media is an important environment for policy labor. CIS evidently understands the importance of this dynamic and has seamlessly adapted their usual advocacy activities to new mediated environments. ’t Hart and Vromen (2008) explain that policy advocacy think tanks like CIS devote time and resources to dissemination and marketing of their research meaning they are skilled at using the media. They are also known for testing their policy advocacy in the public sphere through debates. What the phonics debate on 31 July 2018 suggests is that CIS and the Australian College of Teachers were aware of the policy labor networks on Twitter and catered their campaign to that network, providing a hashtag (#phonicsdebate) and live-streaming the debate on YouTube. The recording was then made available for those unavailable on the night of the live debate to catch-up. This also ensured the debaters with Twitter accounts could engage in the backchannel conversations about the issues presented during the debate. The available data indicated that the advocates for USP actively utilized new media policy labor, while those who critique USP were less engaged.

It would be easy to critique CIS and suggest that the think tank is manipulating the parents and carers through online campaigns, or to dismiss parent and carer comments as irrational comment culture. However, the pragmatic reality is that this parent and carer mediated new media policy labor exists and is being utilized. Furthermore, deficit views of parent and carer advocates in education that concentrates on them being misinformed or politically bias is problematic without empirical widespread demonstration. Such theorizations must be balanced with understandings that parents and carers are experts in
the policies which affect their own children, and new media has enabled the collectivization of that expertise. This article shows that parents and carers can be powerful hyper-connectors that bring policy actors together, sustaining networks of new media policy labor in ways that were not possible before social media.

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Notes
1. It is not the purpose of this article to critique what has become known in Australia as the “phonics debate.”
2. If a user retweets, the original post is recognized as the ‘retweeter’s’ original tweet. Therefore, despite insistence otherwise, retweets, according to the Twitter API, equal endorsement.

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