Media Corporations and the ‘Great Equalizer’ in Crisis: Privatizing Education for the Public Good?

Roozbeh Shirazi and Mary Vavrus

“Vast and overshadowing private fortunes are among the greatest dangers to which the happiness of the people in a republic can be subjected. Such fortunes would create a feudalism of a new kind; but one more oppressive and unrelenting than that of the Middle Ages….Now, surely, nothing but universal education can counterwork [oppose] this tendency to the domination of capital and the servility of labor…Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery.”

Horace Mann, Twelfth Annual Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education 1848

From its inception in the United States, public education has long been envisioned to serve an integral part of a social democratic promise of upward mobility and sociopolitical equality. Despite the long record of racialized exclusion in the US, belief in the emancipatory potential of education has historically fuelled debates and initiatives to desegregate public schools and, more recently, to close “achievement gaps” between white students and students of color. In these efforts, there are echoes of Horace Mann’s call for education to equalize our social conditions, and John Dewey’s admonition that education should not merely constitute preparation for adult life, but instead should play a vital role in the “freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims.”

Thus schools have been imagined to be part of the social contract not only because they present a path towards better individual futures, but also because they have the potential to model conditions for social transformation.

Despite the persistent belief in the equalizing power of schooling, it is clear that social conditions are becoming more unequal and precarious in the United States. Research shows that political changes in the in the past three decades have produced a political order closer to oligarchy than democracy in the United States. Social mobility in the US —when defined as intergenerational earnings mobility—lags behind the United Kingdom and Nordic countries. In top-tier colleges and universities, almost three-quarters of the entering class is from the highest socioeconomic quartile. These shifts challenge the narrative of education as a balancing force against social inequity, and raise questions about whether schools can create more equal socioeconomic conditions at a time when such disparities are proliferating.

Changes in the political order and persistent socioeconomic inequalities have brought new scrutiny to the public system of education in the United States. This scrutiny has engendered fierce debates about the “crisis of failing schools.” As a result, schools and school districts have become sites of political contest, and “school reform” a veritable industry. To be clear, the narrative of “crisis in schooling” in the United States is not new, and can be easily traced back (in different permutations) to the post World War II era, if not further. Brown vs. Board of Education, the Sputnik Crisis, Lynden Johnson’s Great Society programs, federally-mandated desegregation, and the Reagan-era report, A Nation at Risk, all represent distinct historical
moments that located the solutions to pressing sociopolitical problems in education reform; these and other events have pushed schooling into the forefront of public consciousness and debate.

Our research collaborative, *Private for the Public Good?*, emerged from an interdisciplinary interest in examining popular media to understand the underlying assumptions driving discourses of education crisis and reform in the United States. Although the fields of communication studies and educational studies share several intellectual commitments—such as seeking understanding of the political economy of knowledge production, as well as how cultural forms and social practices are produced and circulated within and across diverse contexts—there is not an extensive history of interdisciplinary inquiry or dialogue across these fields. Bridging these fields is important, given the great growth in journalistic, documentary film, and entertainment media examining schools and their role in constructing our society.

We wanted to know what (if any) forms of citizenship media depictions of educational crisis encourage, and how media contribute to the discourse of educational crisis in the United States. In particular, we were interested in looking at how market-driven solutions, such as promoting educational choice and accountability-driven reform, have been expressed through media representations that focus on public education. Additionally, we were curious to know how the obstacles to school reform and improvement were identified and framed in these same treatments. Over the course of our meetings, we compiled an archive of public service announcements, news coverage, and film and television treatments of public education in the United States. Our primary analysis was limited to four films and documentaries about educational crisis in the US that we screened and discussed in Summer 2015:

- *Won’t Back Down* (2012)
- *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman* (2011)

These films are part of a recent wave of film around educational crisis in the United States, and they address questions of policy, pedagogy, educational choice, and equity in their treatments of the American public educational system. The films varied considerably in their depictions of educational crisis: *Race to Nowhere*, for example, is a documentary focused primarily upon the mental wellbeing of youth and how today’s schools, driven by accountability-based reform and high stakes testing, have routinized stress for children and negatively impacted families and conceptions of childhood. The educator and parent-produced documentary, *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting for Superman*, challenges the vilification of teachers unions as an impediment to greater educational equity, and the uncritical assessment of charter schools as an obvious solution for challenges confronting public schools. The film features many educators and parents in the New York City public schools, and also marshals policy analysis and research to challenge the idea of “failing schools” and other claims made in *Waiting for Superman*. The argumentative technique is to make as strong of a data-driven, empirical critique of market-driven education reform as possible in an hour, which may leave the viewer inundated with (relevant) information, but not necessarily feeling more informed.
In contrast, *Waiting for Superman* focused on a smaller number of youth and their families, and tells the story of educational crisis through their experiences of schooling. The climax of the film is a suspenseful montage of charter school lotteries, in which some of the focal students are chosen to go to their desired schools, while others are passed over. The lottery scene and its emotional aftermath are the linchpin for the film’s argument: a high-quality education should be a matter of choice, not socioeconomic status or luck. Finally, *Won’t Back Down* presents a dramatization of school reform events in Pittsburgh. Like *Waiting for Superman*, this film relied on channeling affect—rather than marshaling empirical data—to drive home its message and encourage viewers to align themselves with its premise. It features Maggie Gynlenhall as the unpolished but irrepressible working class mom who is willing to battle the three headed monster of bad teachers, unresponsive administrators, and powerful unions to secure a good education for her daughter. *Won’t Back Down* also draws on an extended school lottery scene to highlight the “unfairness” of the current system and the need for greater school choice.

These films expressed similar critiques of public education “failing” poor students and students of color, while depicting educational choice, and charter schools in particular, as an underutilized solution to address classed and racialized educational achievement gaps. Both films aim to incite an emotional response or engagement with the crisis of public education, rather than empirically comparing the performance and constraints of charter schools versus traditional public schools. Moreover, they frame opportunities for action in particular ways, namely, public school “failure” (often evidenced by standardized test scores) is a window of opportunity for advocating for greater school choice; each film advances the notion that competition in the educational sector will create better educational outcomes, encouraging parents and community members to take a role in creating this change. The similarity between these films was unsurprising in retrospect, as they had a production company in common—Walden Media—and what they fail to explore are ways in which our systems of educational governance, accountability and assessment can be strengthened or renewed beyond such choice-based approaches.

Given the ties between the two films, it was important to members of our collaborative to not only attend to representational strategies of crisis, but also to situate these media representations within a larger analysis of the political economy of market-driven approaches to education reform and media corporations. Because many of us were aware of problematic social consequences stemming from the commercial basis of the US media system, we began to examine ties between corporate education reform organizations and the media outlets associated with them. Not surprisingly, we found a number of individuals and education reform organizations with ties to media corporations. For example, former CNN and NBC anchor Campbell Brown founded and sits on the board of directors of the pro-charter school, education reform non-profit The Partnership for Educational Justice; last summer Campbell launched The Seventy Four, an education reform news site that employs other well-connected journalists formerly employed by mainstream outlets such as *Time* magazine, and is premised on the assertion that “the education system needs fixing.” Fixes associated with Campbell’s project include promoting charter schools and eliminating teachers unions, but she is not alone in parlaying her professional connections into a corporate education reform media campaign: the *Los Angeles Times* recently announced its partnership with various foundations including the Baxter Family, Broad, and Wasserman Foundations to fund its Education Matters program. Education Matters purports to produce “independent journalism” around K-12 education issues
in Los Angeles and across the United States, yet its funding foundations promote corporate, “market-driven” education reform—a situation that both casts doubts on the ability of reporters to operate independently and illuminates yet another media corporation with financial ties to corporate education reformers.

Such links between corporate media and corporate education reform are multiplying in number and tenacity, part of a troubling media trend begun in the 1980s when the Reagan administration began deregulating various industries—media among them. Since this time, media corporations’ size, profitability, and importance to the U.S. economy have all steadily increased; at the same time their commitment to serving the public interest has diminished considerably, despite that being a requirement for receiving and maintaining a license to broadcast over the airwaves. In the United States, the broadcast airwaves have the status of being a public good, understood as necessary for ready access to information about our communities, country, and world—information that we need in order to be fully functioning citizens. Media deregulation has also eroded the Federal Communication Commission’s (the media and telecommunication regulatory agency in the US) mandate to uphold the public interest in its policy-making and enforcement. These shifts in the media environment over the last 30-plus years have been described by Robert McChesney as anti-democratic because they have “undermined the media system’s ability to serve democratic values and practices; it cannot serve two gods.” McChesney has chronicled the impacts of such media privatization on democratic governance and journalism; these mutually constitutive practices are increasingly driven by commercial imperatives such as the requirement that news organizations, like their non-news media counterparts, maximize profit and deliver dividends to their shareholders. Among other problems, this has led to news media shying away from reporting that critiques corporate capitalism or that asks whether it is appropriate to foist commercial values and practices on non-commercial institutions.

That corporations represent the ideal organizational structure has thus become an article of faith in news reports on a variety of public institutions; public schools are no exception. The notion that students would benefit if their schools were “run like a business,” for example, has been trumpeted widely across news reports about higher education. Reporting on the K-12 system exhibits a similar deference to privatization and other projects promoted by corporate education reformers. Economist Richard Wolff notes that such uncritical acceptance of a corporate model of operations appears in media coverage of public institutions generally, reporters failing to point out problematic aspects of the corporate model. What’s more, Wolff points out that reporters typically do not venture out of this frame to acknowledge the many benefits associated with public, non-profit organizations, including educational institutions. Thus, we do not hear of reporters asking whether a failed business or industry should be “run like a school,” despite many public school systems having clearly successful track records that stand in contrast to those of failed industries.

McChesney reminds us that “an informed citizenry is the foundation of democracy, and there is no route to such an outcome that does not require a strong news media system and a healthy system of public education.” The growing integration of public goods into the private sector, like airwaves and school systems, thus raises questions about the nature of our public institutions and the rising influence of private actors over them. What is “public” about public goods?
Which publics are our institutions accountable to, and which publics have access and influence over our institutions?

In thinking about the future of public education, such questions are not merely academic semantics: they connect to more recent struggles to reclaim public spaces and institutions from the encroachment of private interests and market driven approaches to administration and reform. There are growing grassroots efforts to support student and family rights to “opt out” of standardized testing in US K-12 education. As part of our research collaborative, we invited noted education policy scholar, Dr. Julian Vasquez Heilig—along with University faculty and students, public school administrators, teachers, and community organizers—to participate in a discussion of community-based approaches to education reform.

At the postsecondary level, related questions of the transformation of the public good and encroachment of private interests at public institutions are being debated. Several universities have recently witnessed large demonstrations against the administrators who come from corporate business backgrounds. At the University of Iowa, several hundred demonstrators protested the Iowa Board of Regents Meeting to present more than 1000 signatures calling for the dismissal of Bruce Harreld who became university president despite no previous experience in higher education and a career spent at IBM. At the University of Missouri, former President Timothy Wolfe (who also came to higher education from a corporate background and stint in the computer business) and Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin resigned after a wave of protests highlighted administrative indifference to on-campus racism, and the elimination of graduate student health care as a cost cutting measure. On our own campus, we have seen the emergence of student-led movements calling for more substantive engagements and greater inclusion of marginalized voices with issues of equity and diversity at the institution. At the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, the University’s chancellor, Phyllis Wise, resigned over being implicated in a scandal over hidden emails from donors and alumni involving the rescinding of the academic appointment of Steven Salaita, a Palestinian American scholar of American Indian Studies. The rescinded offer resulted in large campus protests and nationwide campaigns calling for censure of UIUC for abandoning the principle of academic freedom and for Salaita’s reinstatement, culminating in a legal settlement of the case resulting in UIUC paying Salaita $875000. These incidents, while different in aims and context, nevertheless draw our attention to localized resistance and critique of the existing paradigm of market-driven reform and management of public educational institutions. Moreover, all of these moments and events lead us to question, to whom do our institutions belong? What are our public values around education?

At the University of Minnesota, a landgrant institution, our mission is to “promote access to higher education and collaborating to advance knowledge benefiting communities, the state, and world.” Though our mission resonates with the vision set forth by Horace Mann nearly two centuries ago, we are asked to do this work at a time when higher education is increasingly assessed as a service or product, and amid growing pressures to be more efficient and competitive despite diminishing state support. The friction produced by these seemingly contradictory mandates is increasingly evident both on and beyond our campus, as students, staff, and faculty are mobilizing to call into question who benefits from institutional policies,
how educational institutions carry out their “public” mandates, and how responsive they are to their increasingly diverse publics.

Our research collaborative began when a group of faculty from across disciplines and academic units at the University expressed interest in understanding how depictions of “crisis” are used to leverage change in educational systems. Along the way, we saw how our questions have implications beyond research, and speak to ongoing social and political contests that are unfolding across school districts and university campuses around the country. It is increasingly clear that asking what is the purpose of education and how it contributes to the public good should not be a conversation to be had solely by policymakers, a narrow stratum of reformers, media corporations, or educational administrators. If the events we have discussed are any indicator of the urgency of this discussion, then it is clear that these questions have captured our collective imagination, and that there is still much more work to do if public education is to be the great equalizer.

9 McChesney, p. xxxvii.
13 McChesney, p. lv
14 See http://unitedoptout.com/


20 See http://landgrant150.umn.edu/